

THOUGHT OF THOUGHTS

BOOK THREE: PERHAPPINESS



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Book 1: *Be-lie-ve*
Book 2: *Am I Me?*
Book 3: *Perhappiness*
Book 4: *The Veil Betwixt*
Book 5: *Flat Solids*

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1: PERHAPPINESS

Here comes the phase that is known as losing things in order to find them. To feel the full force of that dissonance both in senses and in words, one has to trace how the instinct for happiness, natural to all human beings, is filtered through different circumstances, most of which might be described metaphorically as promising seeds with unpromising fruitfulness. (The other way around is true enough too.) All desires generally express the human search for happiness, however diversely each of us understands it. Having neither a beginning nor an end, human wants multiply further wants, to give them an independent status; not only their gratification is temporal, but the manifold and long-wished-for means of happiness can also become the source of misery. In that view, *Perhappiness* seems to be an adequate term for the general state of being; it is how people live through their days of struggle to be happy. With a kind of aesthetic gusto, the photographic series with that somewhat insecure title traces the repeatable consequences of pleasure and pain chasing each other – the game with the hard rules that come to us from elsewhere (as do our souls). What is happening might mingle in the imagination with what has already happened and what is going to happen (or at least might). To express this unstable state or deceptive “algebra” of the imagination, whatever it is, we developed the series of works that goes in our mind by the name of *Perhappiness*. In retrospect, it is clear that behind its widening and intensifying psychological ripples, we always tended to emphasize their spiritual residue, which underlying magnetic force not only activated our imagery but was also felt deep in our bones.

The marriage of meaning and form is not the result of a practice of any kind, but as the years go by, it is consummated by “the effect of grace,” at least that is how some serious achievements were explained in the past. Creative principles have to concern mainly the question of unveiling not imitating. For that very reason, *Perhappiness*, in spite of its proliferation of aesthetics, neither emulates the fairness or ugliness of nature, nor does it meddle in hot social issues. The magical aspect of *Perhappiness* deals with the play of para-

doxes that underlie the bittersweet scenario of life. It encodes a range of themes: the play of intuition, theurgical elements, the contemplative state, and the aesthetic quest. If the previous series *Photoglyphs* “speaks” primarily through words and drawings, inscribed on the human skin as if on the parchment, *Perhappiness* is a visionary development. We see the latter as a mode of existence, in which “perhaps” and “happiness” are entwined. The word “perhaps” is rather tricky, its meaning encompasses uncertainty as well as possibility. Each of us has a dose of happiness that can be characterized as *perhappiness*.

People seek explanations for everything through their surface reasoning and pragmatic experiences, improvising and getting involved, if necessary, in all sorts of *perhappenings*. However informative these patterns may be, the popular viewpoints are seldom enlightened and accurate. There are inner causes for things and events that make sense and are not susceptible to logical solutions, but rather may be “unveiled” through allegorical interpretations. The word “unveiled” in itself seems to presuppose the existence of certain symbols and ideas that are hidden or perhaps nearly forgotten in today’s culture, the mainstream of which is based on the technology of external manipulation upon the matter. In all times, writers tended to depict the deterioration of sociocultural values, the decline of which is now markedly accelerated. In various literary genres, we find that situation depicted rather dramatically, often with phrases as though they were written for an obituary for the culture. In itself, it is true enough, but it saves nothing for the end. Should one be awakened from a spell of technocratic delirium, the meaning of the manipulation upon matter can acquire a much deeper interpretation, not only in relations to the surrounding world but also affecting both metaphysical and ethical dimensions. Clinging to that which all the world desires is not entirely safe, moreover, according to Oscar Wilde’s observation and likely his experience, “When the gods want to punish us, they answer our prayers.” Little does one guess the almost miraculous way that one’s desire to reassess the value of material happiness might be gratified.

Visual art is not immune to similar lamentations, but it is not focused on remodeling the world with words, it envisages the process in silence and with a certain ambiguity.



Fallen Grape © 2001

Spreading out to the subtler fields, art in its “inherent matrix” is improvisation in thinking with images with no dependence on verbal forms. A picture is a substance formed from the sublimation of thoughts; at least that is how the *Fallen Grape* solidified in our picture with that title. The fruits of life are ripening behind the veil of that very *perhappiness* we are talking about, but void of words, exactly as it is in the instance of the *Fallen Grape*, which mysterious fall is caught in the photograph. You might say that over the years, all grapes will drop down one by one, as an offering of destiny. Some of them are sweet, some taste like promising fortune-

cookies, while others are sour. On top of everything else, one must always be cautious, for the world is full of those foxes ever ready to spoil the grape.

The secret of harvesting the real grape from its concept is veiled. In relating all things to their origin in the subtle world, including that grape, we can trace the different degrees of density of their forms: from an abstract concept to its tentative sketch of ripening in a matter that finally takes a concrete physical form – a real grape fit for eating. The aesthetic features, particularly the misty veil, accommodate that transformation by hiding how the ethereal bunch of grapes shown in some pre-existent state (as if this grapevine is planted in the biblical soil) produces a single grape that after its fall takes on an earthly quality. That is how the mental image “crosses” the border of reality. This concept might be interpreted not only as an attempt to look behind nature’s curtain but also *pro* and *contra naturam*. In favor of nature or *pro naturam*, we can feast on our ripe fruits of life supporting it with the thousand poetical quotations and bucolic scenes of unending life with its absorbing beauty and many pleasures. In dry contrast or *contra naturam*, all these scenes from the beginning already belong to nature’s prophetical herbarium – life is one autumnal day. In a year or two or twenty, the pleasant images of harvest (the fulfilled desires and moments of success) will fade – as in life so in mind – and reality, blended with its remnant shadow, will be indistinguishable from the fruits and fancies of memory. Everything is transient, especially the happy moments; the fruits of fleeting feelings stay only a little while before they are gone.

Many live in the incessant pursuit of desires, obsessive as tail-chasing, in which the satisfaction of one wish quickly gives rise to another – a vicious cycle that calls to mind the glamorously brutal melody of *I Can’t Get No Satisfaction* by the Rolling Stones. The standard of material happiness has been raised by our civilization, in which spiritual content became rather shaky. Considering that divergence, the longing for happiness also has many degrees of attainment: some things are within immediate reach while others are unattainable. We might blame an earthly impediment for our lack of real happiness or point the finger at gods that are by no means always benevolent to people. But there are other things to consider as well. Beneath this bitterness, it is hard to

realize how our personal attachments to... (we leave the space blank, for each has one's own items to write in it) make us dependent on them. Usually, in a couple years from the moment of their supreme rule over our actions, we regard them as an act of folly, perhaps excusable, yet still an act of folly.

If man's character is based on the results of human desires, which force and velocity are different, so are their lives with all its subsequent *perhappenings*. The developing man is both a process and the result of a process, containing the universal within the individual, even if their binding looks too conventional and less than complex. An ordinary man is wedded to his ordinary desires. One might be a captive of Eros, another can be mesmerized by mass media, organized religions, or belong to arts. Some are inclined predominantly towards gross matter and buying life with money, while others add some immaterial values to their material

Resting © 1997



interests that by themselves might be a measure of happiness. To further progress in diverging directions, material interests may grow, but only to prove by contradiction that eventually they turn out to be exhausting rather than stimulating. Clear and reasoning thoughts, which reduce and control desires and ambitions, have no admiration for utility. Socrates' wish for material wealth was worth only as much as a wise man can carry in his hand. And yet, it is quite possible for a man to be unhappy in his superior mind and in his virtue, and still unhappier in his weaknesses that can quickly undo all the work of his reason.

The terms of logic "either-or" are inadequate for the de-

Holding in Mind © 2002



finition of *perhappiness*; on the other hand, the well-worn cliché “moderation in all things” brings even more uncertainty to the issue. Under the mask of self-control, even the behavior of a complete cynic can look like a miracle of prudence. Some moderates like to preserve their own myth of being ever content, always pretending that everything is all right or at least perfectly manageable. There are also those who become inert towards everything, should their *anima vitalis* take pleasure in melancholy or happen to be atrophied by lethargic disgust. They live inertly in some neutral zone with zero electric charges or potential. Such state of permanent neutrality, where nothingness reigns and life is fruitless,

Shared Egg © 2002



is an exact opposite to the spiritual balance, the state, which is also neutral, yet full of energy, serene and spontaneous with benevolence. Having built an energetic wall from the destructive influence of the outside world and personal vulnerability, one could be immune to both extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. The Buddhists call it a middle way.

The mythology that supplements our world with allegories and symbols of another order of existence might add to this prosaic observation an extraterrestrial twist. There are many stories of different celestial personages that fall on earth because of their emotional attachment to earthly pleasures, thus becoming “bundles of protoplasm” as everyone else here. The theme of the fall is essentially international, that is why the Western fallen angels share some characteristics with the Eastern sages that gravitate towards the lower planes upon using up their good karma. Having fed upon the pleasures of the world, their souls must return to the world and endure the reversal, with all the consequences that can hardly be described as “nice.” The newly descended soul knows at once too much and too little. A great deal of practice is required before one can be even occasionally successful in reversing the karmic wheel and lifting one’s own mind to the lost knowledge of an incorporeal nature. So we guess, comparing various myths depicting crisscross patterns of microcosm and macrocosm. And reading our own mind about their intersection, we veil its concept behind the images, reversible as the curtains pictured in them. Their somewhat occult-looking folds veil the border between the different modes of existence, visible and invisible, suggesting that their numinous threshold remains accessible to the imagination.

The state of *Perhappiness* with its inherent longing for pleasure is embedded by nature in all creatures; moreover, it is quite possible that in our own feelings we experience the pleasure and pain of nature itself. That is why its general patterns remain the same even in our digitally disrupted age with all its admiration for utility. Nature always prevails in both collective and individual psychology but in different ways. Examples of the timeless observation of these differences within the general state of *perhappiness* come from the analytical mind of Voltaire. In *Story of a Good Brahman*, the main character, whose thoughts are in agreement with those



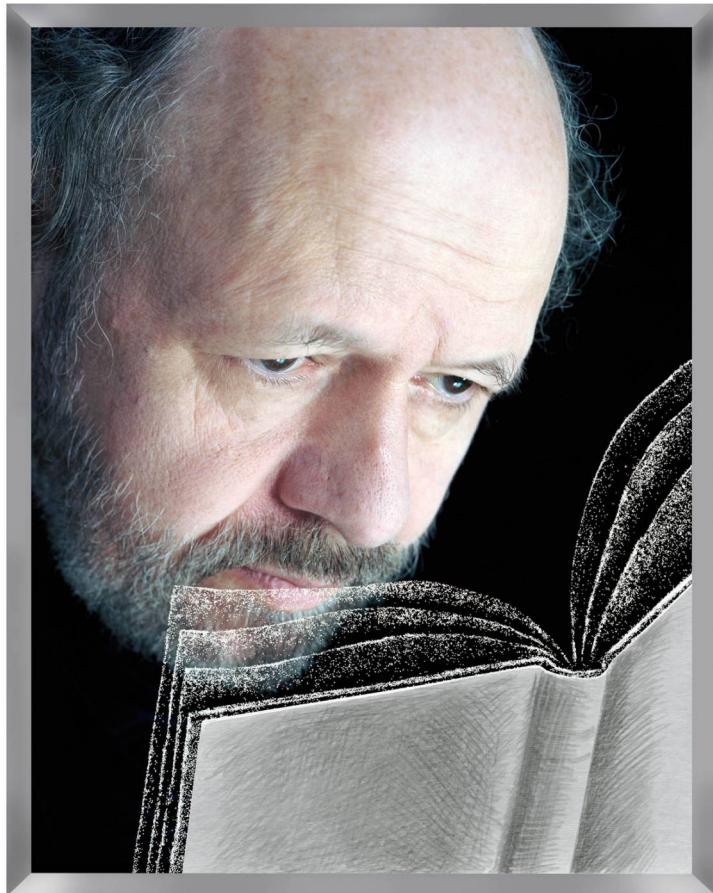
Icarus © 1997

of the author, loathes the idea of turning into “an automaton who thinks of nothing and who lives happily,” that is, rejecting any happiness at the price of imbecility or dementia. Ruminating further in the direction of happiness, he deduces, “I would be happy if I was as stupid as my neighbor and yet I would want no part of such happiness.” With not a less ironic twist, he turns over in his mind some other possibilities of happiness, imagining that if he had been wicked, like so many others, he would be happy like them. On the other hand, any permanence also bears its poisonous fruits, therefore “always pleasure is no pleasure.” That degree of doubt is

drastically reduced, if not fully altered, in Voltaire's parody of initiation rites drawn on the life example of *Candid*, whose teacher literally brings these matters to self-negation, announcing: "There is a pleasure in having no pleasure."¹

Arthur Schopenhauer, pessimistic about that subject in general, interprets it fatalistically; his sour ironic remarks drastically differ from the delicate subtlety of Voltaire's light-handed mockery. For Schopenhauer, "to live happily only means to live less unhappily... It is extremely easy to be very unhappy: while to be very happy is not indeed difficult, but quite impossible."² If we are to increase the feeling of

Hard Cover © 2004, photo, metal



uneasiness, we have to prepare ourselves for the worst, which eventually might turn out to be the best. The worst seems to be formulated by Seneca: “If man wishes to be happy, he should first consider that he must despise and be despised.”³ The thought might be shrewd enough, but it is of a nature to make the Roman philosopher long for death. One dies as best as one can, so did Seneca and Socrates before him, looking calmly in the face of death.

As to the best of the possible regarding happiness, it seems to be explicitly described by Plotinus, “Pleasant conditions add nothing to true happiness, and the unpleasant do not lessen the evil in the wicked... For the soul’s expression is not in action but in wisdom, in a contemplative operation within itself; and this, this alone, is happiness... He will desire nothing of this world... then pleasure and health and ease of life will not mean any increase of happiness to him nor will their contraries destroy or lessen it.”⁴ The exchange of opinions of the wise minds across time and space might be continued endlessly, and since their message is more or less clear, we end it with the Aristotelian strategy: “To be happy means to be self-sufficient.”⁵ In summary, real happiness is unconditional; it doesn’t fade away with a change of situation. It is a balanced state wherein the dualism of happiness and unhappiness disappear: a treasure hard to find.

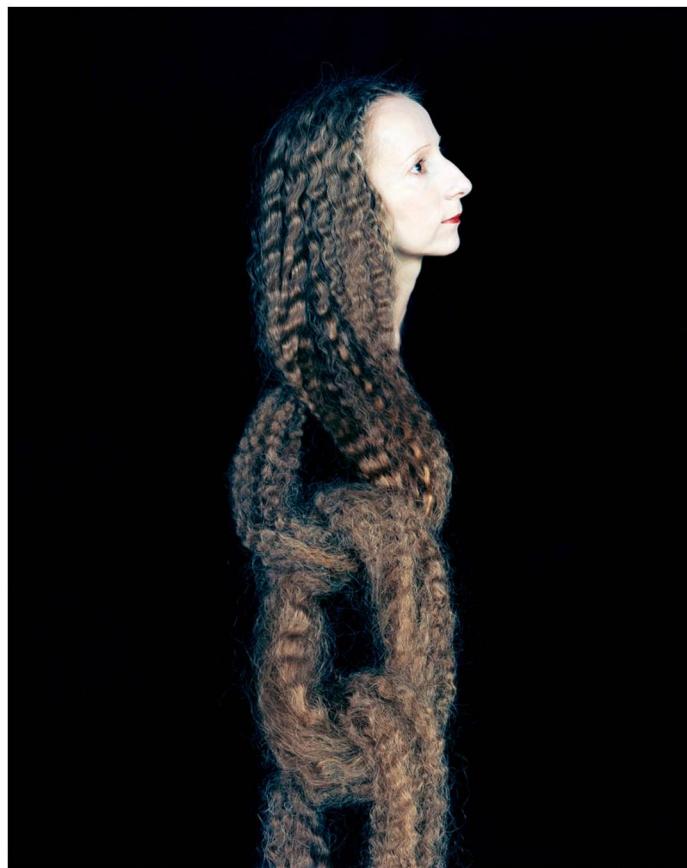
Happiness is quick, while sadness seems to be slow; in both cases, the flow of time is distorted by our feelings. Sorrows, as a natural by-product of desires, make us seldom think of what we have, but always of what we lack and want. Grimly, that is mocked in the old joke about a man who complained about his lack of shoes until he met a man who had no feet. The human thirst for happiness is eternal, and people are always living in expectation of better things. Technically, the chain reaction of desires breeding endlessly creates habits, which, in the end, control men. Considering Cicero’s view of that control – “Libido or unbridled desire is found in all fools”⁶ – it is of a rather deplorable nature. Acknowledging the tremendous driving force of desires, one must operate them correctly and for the right purpose. (We leave it to each one to decide what their purpose is, adding the proverbial warning: grasp no more than thy hand will hold.)

The important fact is that the magnetic force that sets in motion the spiritual process in human beings on the material

plane is also incited by desire, to use this word in place of aspiration. But when both these feelings of desire and aspiration fuse in the spiritual process, it tends to develop in a most disagreeable way. The dichotomy brings a sharpening of opposites, in particular, the egotistic and altruistic sides of the personality, up to the conflict between self-indulgence and self-mortification. It's like one is attending a wedding and a funeral on exactly the same day. The conflict subsides if one of the opposites reaches its extremes, either giving pre-eminence to matter in everything or vice versa, rising above all desires while emptying them into spirit.

And how is one to understand "emptying them into the

Chaining © 1998



spirit,” besides as a metaphor for a state that can be better imagined than described? In striving from lower to higher things, from strength to strength, more than once, the initial aspiration would be on the point of giving up the crusade. If there is such a “thing” as positive sorrow, then it may help to restore what is periodically destroyed. In a chain reaction of losing and finding, one has to experiment with exploring the extra-dimensional geography of spirit if that is how we are to diagram the development of a psychological state of an individual with spiritual potency and, be it the case, with an overdose of a bad experience. Following the cause-effect reaction, little by little any situation tends to overgrow into its

Sunny Moon © 2000



opposite. When sorrow brings disappointment in hopes rested upon illusions, both hopes and illusions are bound to vanish leaving instead certain life lessons that eventually increase knowledge. Upon reaching a certain degree, knowledge brings enlightenment, and enlightenment dispels sorrow and pacifies desires, emptying them into the spirit. This chain reaction is corruptible as all composite things, but the hope is there; especially when it rests upon the belief that everything in life seems to be calculated to bring us back from our original errors, sooner or later.

The series *Perhappiness* is pervasive of a general atmosphere of equilibrium, or rather, a whimsical balancing, moderately realistic, but not without magical elements. Regardless of the subject, each image preserves a kind of ethereal stability, even if it is dangerously entranced with a pulsing unnamable force. The equilibrium we imply is rather exquisite, if not heavenly and ghostly altogether. It is not a technique or tactic of any kind, but it comes out of an artistic arsenal which has resources that are essentially anonymous. The peculiarity of this approach, in words seemingly contradictory, might be described as this: the complicated things are easy to create, while simplicity is the real challenge. In the opinion of Leo Tolstoy who called that ingenious nuance of simplicity “just a touch,” the subtle mastery over that subliminal “touch” is a token of the highest creative achievement. The paradox is that any effort to achieve that kind of insubstantial technique simply annuls the achievement, leaving behind only the effort. The most difficult task is to visualize and express the sublime, but it does not mean that one must not make an attempt to. In *Perhappiness*, we try to let things simply go their own way: not too little, not too much, just that little bit of “perhaps” and “happy.”

The human figure in *Perhappiness* is not so much a canvas for representation as before but acts as an initiator into the knowledge of some secret arts. At this phase of our photo-iconography, the image turns into a kind of mystagogue with his/her alter ego as an apprentice. There is no sharp demarcation between the two; moreover, the situation may be presented as a picture of a “wo- and man” watching themselves having illusions. Let us slip into one of them. Can one make strange things without actually doing them, as it is depicted in *Cross Hands*? The atmosphere of that somewhat

optical illusion is out of all semblance of worry, whereas one hand pierces the other. The sign of the painful cross seems to appear on its own and is free, so to speak, of metaphysical



Cross Hands © 1996

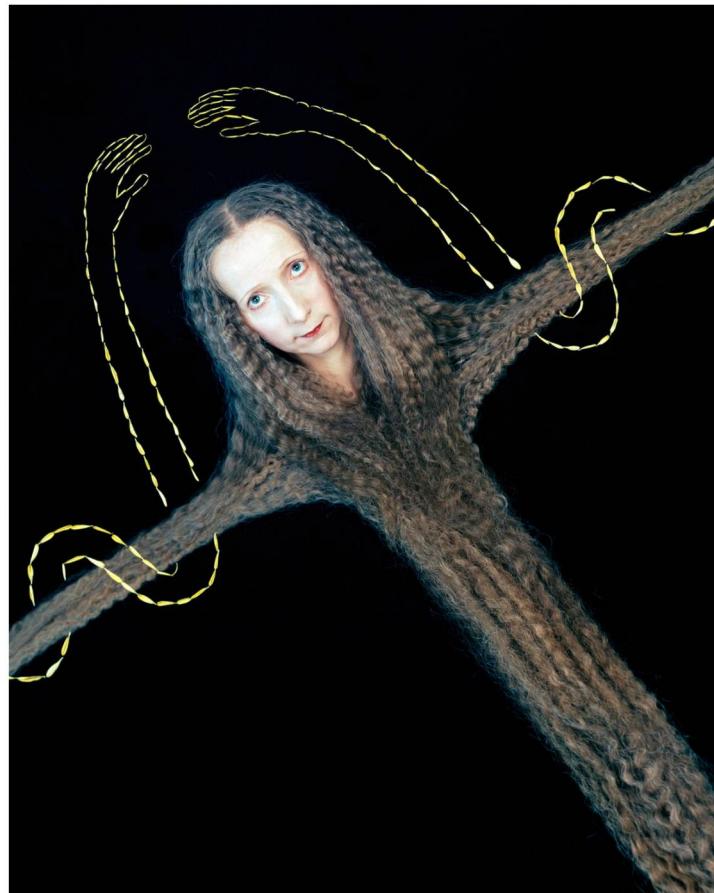
dogma. The serene poise and marmoreal impassive face serve to direct the image towards inexpressible sublimation, in so far as it is inexpressible. The excess mental suffering associated with the cross is more than overbalanced here; and yet, one cannot neglect the simple fact that the heart of any normal being rebels against torment. The fluidity in the inter-

pretation of that image does not arrest the concept behind it – the startling juxtaposition of the illusion of suffering and the suffering of an illusion.

In going deeper into the metaphysical content of *Cross Hands* less accessible to observation, it would be hard to avoid some “dead ends” explored in different religious and philosophical systems. Since art and literature always approach it in an elliptical way, so do we. Sometimes difficulties of bearing the cross reach the point at which they might outweigh the fear of death. Somewhat extreme but toughening, that attitude could grow into a belief and even into a way of life which strategy was aptly formulated by Gandhi: “Man lives freely only by his readiness to die.” What if the sincere contemplation of the terrifying but ultimate “adventure” symbolized by the cross changes everything in life’s setting, reducing all common values to nothing?

This grim paradox is put forward not for the sake of argument but merely to illustrate how life brings unexpected, if not illogically dangerous, events that easily entrap man within their strange dimensions, which an average person should not know how nor in what direction to measure them. What comes to us with a piercing acuteness naturally evokes an equally strange response, which is parabolically expressed in the hands piercing each other in *Cross Hands*. The peculiar calmness suggests that the manual sign might be interpreted not only as an imitation of the cross but also as its assimilation through an involuntary experience and consequent understanding of the nature of living. The four-folded pressure of what we call “nature of living” was always represented by the sign of the cross. In rare cases, mystical awareness came upon its witnesses (“witness” in Greek is “martyr”) in the form of stigmata that appeared spontaneously on the skin of some religious believers. In Christomimetic theology and its various parallels in the Eastern doctrines, those who can surrender themselves to the spiritual power are able to transmit it into the world.

As to the peaceful atmosphere peculiar to the images depicting the cross and other solemn items, its meaning is metaphoric: the silence, calmness, and solitude facilitate activation of the link to the realm of the archetypes. What does it have to do with the nature of suffering? In the Gnostic view, only human nature experiences pain, while the divine nature



Crossing © 2000

behind it transcends any adverse effect of living. The physical order of things adds to our lives its own rules of precarious justice closely integrated with nature. The serenity of the feminine image (nature was often envisaged in a female form) suggests that the painful correlations might be apprehended progressively – the cross is conceived and brought forth by Nature herself: she crucifies, beatifies, and revives simultaneously. Reformulating it in an alchemical way, expressly and simply, that is how *nature overcomes nature*.

Even if we view *Perhappiness* as an expected state experienced in pursuing the shadow of happiness with unwearied

labor, it can still bring its own magic into man's half-contented wishes. They, to give human desires the status of beings, create their external world and live in it as though in a comedy of errors: "Much *Perhappiness* About Nothing." As a mystery in a process and in a project, it shows how something can be four things at ones: happy, unhappy, both, and neither – and their broadcasts can be switched at random by that subliminally doubtful "perhaps."

In depicting the philosophy of illusion, it would not be enough to use metaphors and similes; *Perhappiness* is an illusory universe, inhabited by images of human beings, miraculous apparitions, and archetypal figures. In art, they are

Fisherman © 2001





Cherry Profile © 2001

not entirely personal creations, being partly a by-product of the mythology and/or various religious and cultural systems prone to utilize the phenomena of mass hallucination. Daily, it is seen, or rather *shown* to us that the mass media routinely disguises one thing under another; therefore, “good” and “bad” are not trustworthy labels to stick onto our reality. For instance, camouflaging predatory wars as “the fight for freedom” always ensures the support and enrollment of the stupefied masses in these bloody messes. Why do we illustrate the principles of magic with such bold patterns? The power of illusion depends solely upon psychic influence and one’s susceptibility to it. In itself, it has nothing to do with the

development of the moral nature, and therefore it may be and actually is dangerous.

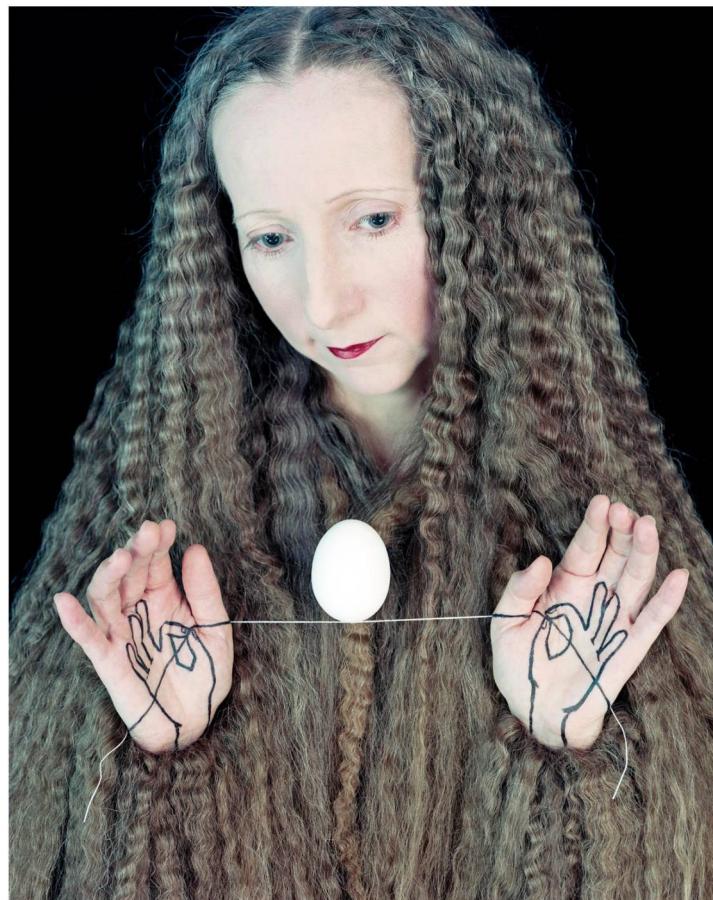
Let us temporarily close our eyes to the negative side of *maya* and align ourselves with the positive archetypes, with those whose mental creations are coming to life here for better purposes. Such incidents of magic, at their best, have to produce a new dimension of ethical awareness in the souls that are able to witness them, not unlike the case of seven loaves and a few fishes. (Matt. 15:36) Recognizing supersensitive truth, the entire series of the images of *Perhappiness* operates according to supernatural laws, which in themselves are quite natural, at least in art and mythology. For instance, you are not surprised that Oedipus is also not surprised at the Sphinx asking her riddles (the Greek Sphinx happens to be female). Like the Athenians of old, the Red Riding Hood of post-medieval origin takes it for granted that the wolf can talk. Each Christmas, the Nutcracker toy turns into a prince and dances *grand pas de deux* for the delights of ballet enthusiasts, magnetized by music and the lure of waltzing flowers. That does not violate the guidelines of our common sense, temporarily suspending its distinction between things possible and impossible. Having that in mind, let us turn to more complex and challenging cases of a similar kind.

By virtue of the fact that “all is one,” certain types of magicians and yogis could transform one thing into another; moreover, by their strong imagination and vital involvement, they could transfer their own consciousness into the consciousness of another through the universal mind (or *chitta*). Going further in that all-is-one direction, we may add that through the holographic power of mental projection, even thoughts might become physical objects. If so, by way of illustrating probability, that might be how a 3-D picture that we mistake for the world appears. Then, the world would be similar to an object that had not existed until the powerful conjurer conjured it into reality. Do not hurry to reject that piece of reasoning as holographically updated nonsense. There is something there that joins some elements of quantum physics to a witchy sense of cosmic magic or *maya*. That makes it impossible to accept preeminence of matter in the principle of existence which is a mystery in itself. With a new acuteness, the quantum theory made a “small” addition

to that mystery by changing what the meaning of “is” is. However, in mythology, magical and creative arts, both the definite and indefinite meanings of “is” always coexisted as two sides of one coin. Therefore, the supernatural law, according to which the world of *Perhappiness* operates, is not so supernatural after all.

All photographs feature various kinds of wonderworking enhanced with the metaphysics of the beautiful, however strange that alliance may sound. Life is viewed as a web of interrelations of the seen and unseen, which codes and symbols might be found everywhere, on land and at sea, with

Magic Touch © 2002



the marine products of which we illustrate these ideas. Supposedly, the fish depicted in *Big Fish* is caught with the bare hands (it's tempting to add here, "and divided among all"), of some behind-the-scene fisherman. In spite of the phantasmal quality of the catch, the simple fact remains obvious – the desired thing is visualized, thus allowing its speculative interpretation to serve our not easily definable purpose. Having swum out of the "probability waves," that fish is not real but palpable, felt by the artist's hands. As an idea has power only when we try to live up to it, so does the extrinsic reality of symbols when generated by mental power. Miraculous fishing is one of the most common features in mythology, when fish, as wondrous food, is caught through the grace of the higher forces. It is said that the faithful service of the heart (free from any mercenary taint) can work miracles, whatever each of us may consider under their meaning. For there is a tight interconnection between the esoteric and exo-

Fish Imagined © 2001





Big Fish © 2003

teric symbols of this cold-blooded aquatic creature. The lidless eyes of a fish were used as a metaphor for the eyes of God that never close, and yet, we don't like it when somebody gives us the fish-eye. This trivial generalization is a mere literary device to illustrate that the eyes of fishes can function in language and art independently of the rest of their bodies. We will leave the marine subject with the saying "you can't keep fish in a bird cage," and move from the aquatic sphere to the air where birds, in Oscar Wilde's view, "fly around uncooked."

Hand Bird is one more example of a "handy" work, and its title already carries part of the message. This bird is

indeed a manual creature operated by human effort and imagination. For man holds in his mortal hands the immortal promise of his winged soul. Symbols (and the bird is one of the most potent of them) have a dual aspect, the real and the supraliminal and prophetic, as if they are mundane and mystical siblings. And whatever is said about the ordinary or queer side of birds, they are still closer to the spirit than quadrupeds, which can't fly. Feeling what they feel while flying, humans with shamanic potential can understand and communicate with them. Our bird-feeding performance captured in the photograph is guided by intuition with airs and graces taken from Renaissance art in which birds were pictured as messengers of the numinous. In the harmonious coexistence with nature, one needs to emulate nature's light touch, its skill in feats and sleights of hand, so to speak.

Outside the subtle allegory, what are we to make of the concept which balance of illusion and reality leaves some unresolved doubts? How could one feed the ghost of a bird when one is not sure it exists? The blurry questions tend to evoke similar answers – the world of magic is inflated by doubts and uncertainties. But we are in the territory of art and can avoid a conflict between the real and the unreal in a creative way, say, by mixing the seeds of imagination with the real seeds that are bound to attract a corresponding eater – a fictional bird made with hands. Inductively joining objects and symbols allows seeing the two sides of reality, as if “turning” it as easily as a door on its hinges. Regard it as the impossible logic of wonder and let it go at that.

We might note in passing that birds usually fly above our heads, in the sky, making us think of lives that are more free and winged than the ones we lead, yet *Hand Bird* came down to feed out of the palm as if it was a pet. Bringing its cerulean world into the earthly one, the *rara avis* (and the soul is usually conceived of as a rare bird) gives us a wonderful feeling of connectedness, linking our low earth with its high sky. So much for the poetic hermeneutics and the glory of the spirit's wings with which our bodies are not supplied. The practical-minded person who never stumbles upon such whimsies would see the didactic point elsewhere, most likely saying: “Better one bird in hand than ten in the bush.”

If we rise above all that can limit us to pragmatism and look at another impossible bird in the hand, it will not come as



Hand Bird © 2003

a surprise that the unreal bird brings a real egg. In the same weird manner as before, a crafty bird lands on a hand as into its *Bird's Nest* (p. 32) and lays an egg. A general guideline is not to try to catch a bird without a good reason. When comes to that, the hands must be clean, for only then the bird *in potentia* can bring out spiritual results. Promised in the title, *Bird's Nest* could be built out of the fluffy hair, which bizarre utilization deserves a separate paragraph.

Many compositions are weaved out of loose hair functioning as threads of life, alluding distantly to Aphrodisiacal vitality and Samsonian strength. Human figures and objects,



Bird Nest © 2002

flora and fauna, fire and water, geometric shapes and origami, they all are created out of hair. It's the most organic material that happens to be close at hand (and on the head). In technical terms, it's a convenient and self-sufficient means of outfitting a woman; it's also the most natural and archetypal fashion that never goes out of fashion. It served us as both pseudo-garment and haircloth for penitence. Since we're inclined to work with atemporal ideas, we have to follow their rules, which demand similar mythological and metaphorical forms for their manifestation. That filamentous structure of flaxen hair, in which nature has enclothed woman, permits us to create a minimum of corporeal density,

thus bringing certain exaltation to the principle of consciousness. Talking about the spirit, we might mention as well the body to which it is attached. In agreement with our fictional vocabulary of *Perhappiness*, the body is often created out of metamaterials, not only of hair, fire, or white dust but also of such stuff that exists without existence. Formed out of emptiness, the shape shifting-body appears bodiless and independent of observation, yet, to use Kant's phraseology, "our senses are affected by this unknown something."

Magnetized by the lure of the *Ding an sich* (thing-in-itself), the images reflect the idea of universalized individuality detached from the outer circumstances of daily life or

Washed Hands © 2001



rather being free of its control. With some kind of telepathic connection of ideas, *Perhappiness* introduces a type of observer whose imaginative empathy with the subjects dealt with is as in a trance, yet with a strong sense of co-participation, in other words, demonstrating detachment and cooperation simultaneously. Each without the other would be meaningless. Trying to decode the causes and consequences of it, we have to admit that we are not adept at contriving common-sense explanations, but do not exclude them entirely. With all its ontological maya, the world that entangles us into its web remains meaningful precisely because of the reality of its things, things that have their own material existence, just like chairs and tables or, as on our photographs, seeds and eggs. At the same time, everything here has its projective psychic correlate, which fabric has a much lower degree of density than the chairs we sit on. The subtle fluidity of the universal psychic life, in which we all co-participate, is continuously perturbed by some fractal pulls and pushes in nature, like an ocean by its waves. Therefore, the dichotomy of the reflective and active life is present in all men. Being pulled two ways, whether by joy or pain or both, is sometimes not easy to know – people are confused by their own mixture of belief and disbelief and in due course might not be able to divide them from each other. Before they can be sure of their angle of vision, they will be striving in some fashion, however cleverly or stupidly, to transcend this uncertainty by making their choices.

The choices we make are often in conflict with our striving for self-determination, colored by our attitude and feelings, notions of good and evil, right and wrong. Is unhappiness given to us to show what happiness is or vice versa? Both the poison and the elixir of life seem to be stored in one vessel of *perhappiness*, which is easy to grope for real happiness in the world of objects. Those who extract pleasures out of sensory objects are usually quickly bored or disappointed and have to change them regularly. If joy comes and fades along with the turning of a situation in the quick transition from a wish to satisfaction, it is surely conditioned and hardly real. In its essence, it remains part of a vivid and continuous dream, deceptive and frail at the end. Real happiness is unconditional while searching for it is conditioned by nature itself.

To understand that conditioning, we must turn our attention to what might be called the prime concern of nature, of which people are aware without knowing of their awareness. That is the pleasure of living, the desire of life per se, which is embedded in all creatures. In a way, it is a pleasure of Mother Nature's, of her very own, which we experience in ourselves: she plays through each living thing, keeping us prisoners of her gratification. Presenting that play in the third person, we get the familiar picture of the world with its vignettes of everyday life. The standard norms are easily diluted when men's evolutionarily designed brains take sole-

Broken Shell © 2002



ly a Darwinian attitude, rooted for better survival amongst the material things of the world and seeing no further. Some people are favored by fate in the vanity of all earthly happiness. Even that can become tiring, repetitious, and dull; and to spice it with excitement and anxiety, the happy life is periodically disrupted by not too happy events. In the case of the young and the brave, they are always ready to take all sorts of chances for changing circumstances. That is how people live through the constant renewal of their experience, exercising on a wheel for squirrels in a culturally advanced way. In the attachment to things, in temporal satisfaction and atemporal unsatisfied longing, man's intellect enables him to invent new increasingly sophisticated means and methods of gratifying his senses. Animals do not have such brainy equipment for the gratification of their wants. By inference, we would venture to say that man in his carnal desires is like a beast magnified by the power of intellect.

To stay vitally alert, people search for all kinds of excitement, whether it is allowed by the rules of the society or not. An increase of pleasure, thrills, and unrestrained spontaneity – everything suits the purpose of renewing the feelings and strengthening the grip on life. Naturally, that attitude turns arts, technology, and everything else into mere entertainment in the profane world. An increase in material accumulations usually increases all other desires. To ward off old age, those who are "guilty" of being born rich or made their way in life by a fortune of a notorious origin tend to resort to any means possible to maintain their melting sense of pleasure. When life is running out, they want to make up for their age by buying life with money. But prosperity can shield against adversity only provisionally while illusory happiness continues to recede like a horizon that one never can reach. Sooner or later, life besets everybody with health problems, screening behind them an impending end. And to finish one's life with pleasure hunting is to endanger one's own psyche, if not altogether wrong. The wheel of constant renewal of experiences is pushed by life itself; it gives us birth and in a day to come will give us our burial. That event can hardly be described as nice, but even then, nature can blow its candles out with imagination, take for example the weird synchronicity that U.S. Founding Fathers John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died on the same day, and that day

happens to be the Fourth of July.

Switching the vicious circle to the virtuous one does not free us from the circle itself, but some changes are inevitable.



Touch of Grapes © 1997

We do not want to sound like a Victorian novel by saying that it is always better to be good and do what is right, or rather, what happens to be pleasant. But if one is to detach oneself from the flux of the latent existence, certain self-training is unavoidable, first and foremost of which would be obtaining the mastery over one's basic instincts. Some seek the harmo-

nious state through devotion, while others do it through knowledge, temporary allaying the fever of the mind that is prone to jump restlessly between seemingly random thoughts. Nothing disturbs feelings as much as acting exclusively on a logical conclusion, that is why most people make mainly instinctive decisions and justify them later by inverted reasoning. But if our thoughts and feelings are able to share their energetic components, preserving them in the state of unbroken flow, the mind will be able to resonate at a higher frequency, responding to meta information. And even that is only a by-product of self-training and not an end in itself. Strange as it may be, the access to gnosis (mystical knowledge) and the contemplation of mystery are never without side effects. The painful aspects of spiritual work – “he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” – was known to many who struggled to grasp things that are in truth far beyond their reach.

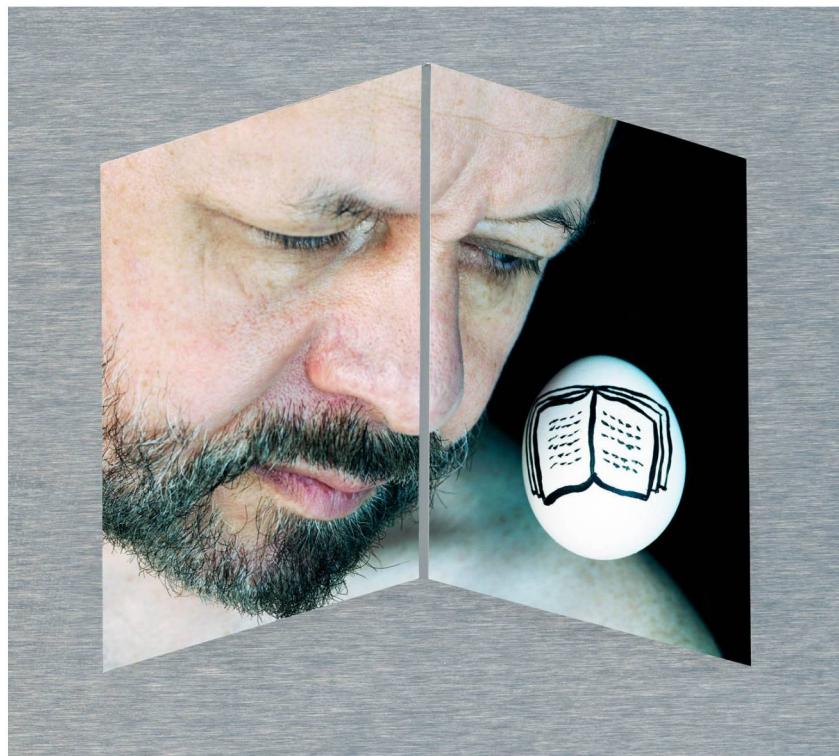


A pile of old stones can have many additions, yet the result is rather predictable – many have sought and few have found. The kind of serenity that we admire in a saint has been pictured by many painters in the past, who themselves hardly knew what they were painting. What is this illuminating peace of mind, called perfect peace profound (aka PPP) by the Rosicrucians? It's impossible to obtain it by conscious striving, but to strive for it consciously is quite possible. Since that (for lack of better words) unquestionable treasure is above all pleasures and limitations of the world of matter, it remains practically unknown, if not unknowable, to the present state of mankind. It is even hardly imaginable without undergoing a radical change in consciousness, the change that presupposes not only the connection with the incorruptible element hidden in human nature, but also literally living in it, say, as fishes live in water. If that state is not described in a precise and clear language, ascribe no blame to us. As yet unrevealed, but potentially still a real state of consciousness, it can grant one not only absolute peace of mind but also the access to *akashic* records (something like the

Great Computer in modern terms). In that light, even pathetic earthly *perhappiness* may be managed for the best.

When driven into little deceptions of happiness, people have many joyful moments, half-happy perhaps, believing that the happiest moment is yet to come. And when it comes along, they often don't recognize it, always expecting more, for the complete unfathomable happiness, from "head to foot." The subtle movements of satisfaction spurred by reading, writing, and thinking are not enough to keep us happy. At some point, people become weary even of their own thoughts and turn to music, visual arts, or mental imagining. Pleasures such as the love of art, poetry, and music give us a refined delight that coarse sense objects cannot. With the direct use of one's own *power of imagining* (something like the medical-magical power of shamans), the

Egg Book © 2005, photo, metal



artificer or simply an individual with such capacity could be able to transform his state of the psyche through his vital, imaginative involvement. Let us build a paradigm under which one thing follows another. The vibrations of words are more gross than vibrations of thoughts that are less concentrated and intensive than mental projections, which in their turn possess not only energy but also gravity and resistance. The faculty of interpreting things visible and invisible plays an important role especially in art clothed in symbolic imagery. It's like the Aeolian harp, which may come to mind upon reading these lines: the power of illusion produces mental images of everything and everyone, and they are immune to everything in the real world precisely because they are illusory. Is not creative art in general of a similar "just about" quality?

Closely allied with the polarity of joy and sorrow, the concept of *Perhappiness* is free from ambition: it develops spontaneously as if a living organism that is giving itself up to the pleasure of being alive. Since consequences must follow even in the creative field of art, the appearance of happiness is often tainted by its uncertainty, sad effects, or some other toxic traces. When the situation comes close to being dangerous, when sorrow evokes fear or something on a similar note, magic can step in and remedy the plot. The spectator is not expected to swallow a miracle but to respond to it intuitively: sometimes meditation on certain essential events might be more important than their actual performance. The same thing might be performed mentally; for example, some religious sects hold that anyone who dreams that he is initiated has in fact been initiated. The contact with the spiritual essence or, if you prefer, the connection between man and the universe unfolds the magical forces (magnetic fields and fluxes); it is not magic that unfolds them, but one's inner integrity.

In *Perhappiness*, the strain between purpose and fulfillment has a poetic undertone, but the storyteller is silent as to whether the consequences are good or otherwise. What is impossible to locate physically might be intuited in art. How is one to depict the state obedient to the voice of the soul? There are things which one does not write but rather feels, and as in the case of our *Solicitor*, might use simple hand language. Suggesting an ardent appeal, almost a prayer, the



Solicitor © 2000

many hands intensify the forceful singularity of purpose of doing that in a plural way. If the interpretation is to stay within the framework of nature in its protective aspect, these are the little hands of children hiding within the robe of Mother Nature: "Ask and it will be given to you," is whispered in their ears. Even if, perhaps, none of this is the case but a kind of aesthetic "theology," we want to find something real in the middle of an illusion or, rather, creative projection in which we use ourselves as a laboratory for experimenting on human nature. At the same time, this work is not entirely detached from the logical approach, for when our minds

picture the actions in our heads, our related nervous reactions are also triggered and, in a manner of speaking, “hold out their hands.” The pensive *Solicitor* only projects his/her reaction and witnesses intelligence, expressing its appeal mysteriously – there is no one that performs an action. When accepting wonders as self-evident, creative expression can deal with the realms in which rational philosophy cannot breathe.

In art, we can accept the little miracles as a happy interruption of mythologically normal reality. In a kind of symbiosis, the symbolism in images arises naturally from the

Camera Obscura © 1997



natural world enhanced by the enchanting qualities of reality. Are we not surrounded by facts quite beyond our comprehension? Understood correctly, the magical moments break through the deluding surface of life and its seductive pleasures and upsetting pains while exposing its undercurrent pervaded by the treacherous flimsiness of maya. At one moment, life shows us its azure skies, at another, its muddy mire is at our feet. Giving us a sweet pill of poison, it plunges us into the memory of happy moments that, as everything precious, seem to be either small or short. The investment of psychic energy in “hot-n-cold” life events can be devastating unless one is capable of maintaining that vague connection with a more sublime world than that in which most of this daily life is spent. People are not programmed like bacteria for survival under all kind of stresses: we need a certain nourishing ability to let things ease in ourselves and at least to some small degree maintain a share in benign spiritual essence.

Here we have to deviate from our metaphoric aberrance and move to a neutral territory, by no means irrelevant to the mainstream of that discussion. The body of artwork *Perhap-piness* is connected “by blood” not only with the photo camera but also with the camera obscura because of its mutual magical quality. The technical details of that gadget require somewhat different phraseology that might stiffen the psychological fluidity of this discourse. However, one can have a little rest from the warning aspects of spirituality by bringing the subject closer to the intersection of science and dramatic arts.

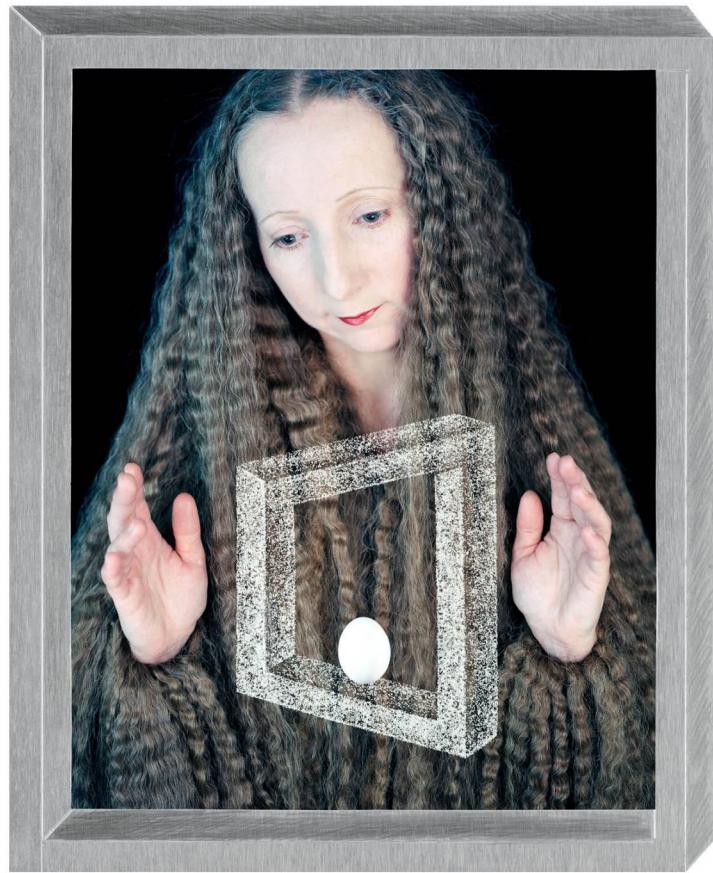
As a prephotographic invention, the camera obscura has served as a tool in science and many creative endeavors. It was also exploited by practicing magicians and many famous artists. Not everybody knows how it works, so perhaps some plain facts will be not out of place in order to demystify its obscurity. The “dark chamber” (that’s what camera obscura translates to in Latin) receives different projections in its dim space through a pinhole. Used for viewing eclipses of the sun without endangering the eye, it works on a naturally occurring phenomenon: the inverted image of the exterior scene is cast on a white wall, or in our simile, on the retina of the receptive eye in a mirrored way.

This very device was employed for “cinema” presenta-

tion as early as in the thirteenth century. When the audience was placed in a darkened room, and the actors performed outside, the moving projection of the performance would be cast upside-down on an inside wall. Imagine the effect of this phantasmagoria in those remote times! The projected pictures seem to be on the same note with the magic of creative imagination. “How did it come into your mind?” we were frequently asked. Perhaps through the same pinhole in the artist’s personal reflex cameras of the mind. In our case, ideas received their final shapes when passed through the additional diaphragm of our photo equipment, also with an upside-down image in the viewfinder. We cannot omit the fact that the invention of the photographic camera was a result of the use of light-sensitive paper for the projection inside that very camera obscura.

In Ancient China, the wondrous gadget of the camera obscura was ornamentally called the “darkened collective place” and “locked treasure room.” In Europe, Johannes Vermeer (and many other artists before and after him) used it for achieving photographic precision by projecting it on some spots of his paintings. It is known that Vermeer never left his native town Delft and, perhaps, painted all his paintings in one room – the same room depicted throughout all his works. We relate these stories as allegories on the wonder of vision in connection with this tricky device to illustrate how creative ideas could be conceived in the “locked treasure room” of the mind, storing the images in its personal “darkened collective place” before they become realized. A real camera obscura can be as big as a room, or portable, even pocket sized. What the latter suggests is that our brains are also pocket-sized devices with the optics different in each and every case.

An author always wants to have a secret hand in his play and, as a looker-on to enjoy an advantageous perception of his own fantasy symbolizing his crime and punishment – and his release. Speaking the language of alchemy, one can zip the long and arduous process of self-transformation through self-observation into a compressed format efficient for data storage for eternity – the philosopher’s stone begets, conceives, and brings itself forth. But that would be premature because, at first, an author puts forth his case hypothetically, as though it were the case of a third person; then, gaining



Framed Egg © 2003, photo, metal

experience, he begins to tap on his personal involvement, binding it together with many strands of myths, legends, art, and theory. And so the game goes on. Wearing the guise of a visual diary, all our works are welded to spirit and purpose, even though they are seasoned, as it were, with certain eccentricity and exotic inversions, or may seem to be too tranquil and vague: expressing everything and nothing. Sometimes, we think they are launched as messages in bottles set adrift. We admit that the phantasmal quality of images might skew their hermeneutical panorama, making their subtext mystically obscure or, we would prefer to think, imperceptibly subtle and graceful. The language of art seems to speak



Egg upon Egg © 2002-05, photo, metal

through us, and not, as is the usual case, the other way around. Still, we hope that its message will transpire. To make the matter more clear, we best convert all that we have said in more rational terms: the series *Perhappiness* is born of the interlock of sublime paradoxes, mythological reality, and spiritual searching with necessary ethical implications, indirectly directing the mind and the senses towards the ultimate mystery of existence.

Most of the images are contemplative: the faces seem to wear marks of painless reaction to everything, including pain as if banishing suffering and sadness by the healing art. Without elevating stimuli, life can take a depreciating turn.

Everything that has a touch of prophetic instinct can stimulate mental vigor and spiritual curiosity. The pastel images are enveloped by translucent strobe light, reminding us that in art everything can serve as a mere tool for the imagination, which urge for the appreciation of beauty can carry one a little too far. Collecting all veils that aesthetics cast, we can interpret the calm atmosphere of images as one of them, exactly as in our real lives, in which insecurity veils itself behind an apparent tranquility, a stroke of good luck could be a nuisance in disguise, but when our fortunes hit rock-bottom, we can find that our spirit gets an unexpected lift. One can write pages about human fortunes and their ironic

Architect © 2004-05, photo, metal



twists. With all its dissonance in promise and delivery, *Per-happiness* is a relative state of contentment, possibly but not certainly. How are we to describe it without a philosophical failure? We suppose that a *delight of non-enjoying pleasures* would be a close enough answer, and so it is. But to only hypothetically describe this state, the more so to prove its existence by the contradiction of the words, would leave us suspended between the two realms of our mind: the one that knows what it is talking about and the one that doesn't – and the flitting between the two perceptions can put one in a sort of mental vertigo. There are plenty of things that we are not expected to understand, and this may be one of them.

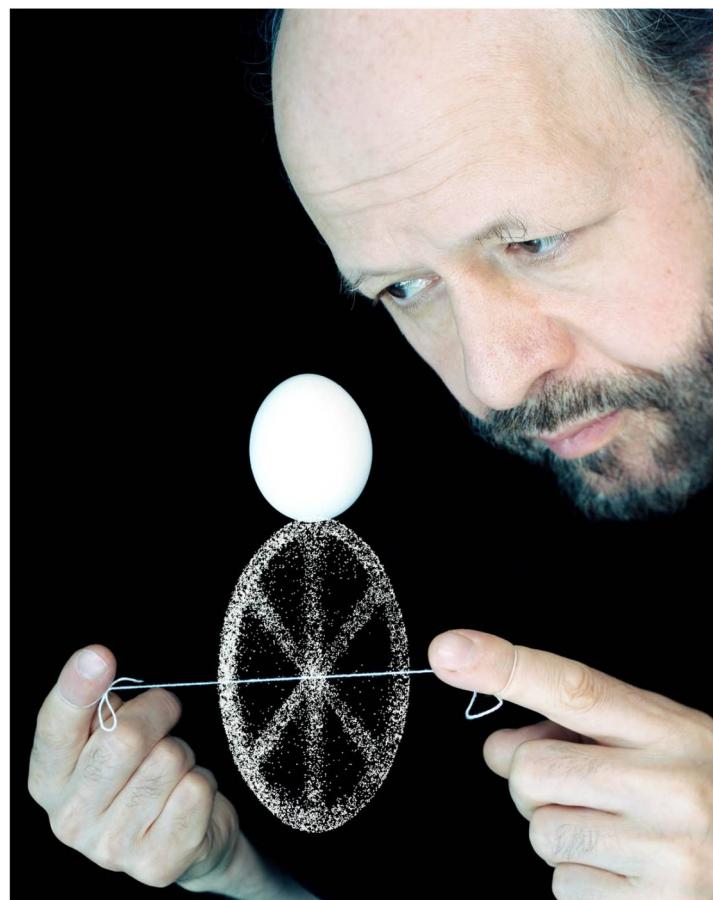
As we have already brought up that subject, we shall try to form some idea of what could be called *delight of non-enjoying pleasures*, at least in general outline. That superior in its quality state has a peculiar kind of calmness, not the stillness of inertia or coolness of indifference, but the peace of self-containment when one has stopped hunting after outward pleasures and pains and remains content and self-possessed in the most trying circumstances. Those, who have achieved that state, are cured of the daydream of matter. Perfect happiness excludes even the very feeling of happiness. Here, one has to put a line of dots to signify many years of trials and endurance to be able to function at that level of consciousness.

In seeking an abode in solitude, one creates one's own world empty of external annoyances and internal striving. The invulnerable center within oneself, should it become accessible, preserves transcendental serenity absolved from earthly struggles, hurts, desires, and joys. It is not a stolen satisfaction or the happiness based on the quick transitions taking place according to the formula "wish-satisfaction-new wish," multiplied one hundred times. All of that is but temporary and, as with any fleeting pleasure, each satisfaction is coupled with the fear of losing it – a matter of constant concern. And our mind is pitifully vulnerable to what can happen next. Should the tempo of such a tale of life increase in speed, the distress and injury that follows is also speedy. Estimating the possibilities, people hope for the best and prepare themselves for the worst, attributing their calamities to the hand of chance, to gods, or to their own follies, while, in fact, that is nothing but one of the cause-effect diagrams

presented in their dramatic sequence.

On the other hand, when the patient work of self-defense and self-release can reach fulfillment, the restless movement in mind and the karmic string will also run its course. The truly good and wise person desires nothing, injures nobody, and fears nothing; he is immune to pain, to imposing circumstances, and one's own imperfections. Such peace of mind comes from contentment irrelevant to comfort (or lack of it) and is sufficiently independent of our much-valued civilization. People try to make themselves a place in its high culture and be appropriately credited in the eyes of the world, while

Rota © 2002



those who put a spiritual purpose into their life consider these types of achievements unimportant, if not altogether a waste of time and resources. Yet, their way of life does not require burning all bridges or renouncing the world – they merely see it as it is. With all its repetitions of catastrophes, “world history” is not a truthful sequence of what happened but an arrangement of fabulous surmises, fabrications of the victors, and social media brainwashing. Our civilized world where, in Thoreau’s words, “millions of people are lonesome together” is full of brilliant opportunities and even more brilliant disasters. Maybe each individual with all his collective benefits from today’s progress suffers more than our ancestors who lived a much simpler life in a natural, frugal manner.

The ability to remain active while inactive and vice versa is another quality of those who are able to be happy at their ease. That kind of *perhappiness* is not distorted by excitements and thrills, and no effort to gain them is involved. Equanimity and balance give poise and assurance without emptiness in the heart. But even when the contrary is the case, taking for an example the heart of Lucifer or a human with a similar potential, one can also maintain equanimity in exercising unlimited power or being unfailingly bright and intellectually superior to the majority of people, say, like a demon to a man or like a man to a dog. Mephistopheles also thinks that happiness and unhappiness is a matter of caprice; for to control the dark forces he also needs equanimity. Neither pleasure nor sadness befits warlocks, magicians, or political moguls, and even less they befit sages. Their techniques of static and dynamic balancing might be off by millimeters, but there is a big difference between their source and their application. The magical power (or stamina in a social context) can keep its possessor young, against the grain of normal time, while sages are graced with the similar quality through their spiritual virtue – they harvest the good not by what they do but by what they are. When they link their minds with the consciousness – that process of integration requires the total man – nothing can help or disturb them: all is between them and God (or supreme cause having many names in the web of overlapping concepts). The great silence comes with the extinguishing of the ego; and something else is added instead, something not easy to define, a curious radiance of personality enveloped in a mass of cool protec-

tive light. One may take it as wishful thinking or a made-up story to prove our point, but they reflect some aspect of reality, perhaps, the one that most of us do not have the power to prove.



Yogi © 1996

To support our personal interpretation of *Perhappiness* and the ideas behind it that admittedly are not new, we have to turn to the reliable sources; this time not of the Western origin, as they are discussed above, but of the Eastern roots. One can find in them counsels working like flashes of lightning: keen, accurate, and profound. Such as this: “Take your

mind above the realm of the trio of thinker, thought, and thinking... All, which is limited or limits is a source of suffering. Prosperity is really adversity; wealth is the mother of poverty... Maya is the realm of change, but to acquire the bliss you must abide in the changeless witness state of pure consciousness, which is above finite and infinite..." (Sri Dada of Aligarh)⁷ The Buddha teaches: "Monks, exert yourself diligently to realize pain, pain's origin, pain's ending, and the path to pain's ending. Build yourself a raft of dharma for crossing the current of life and death to yonder shore of immortality."⁸ The Upanishads enumerate the degrees of bliss through the hierarchy of men and gods, deducing all to the conclusion that true and lasting happiness can only be found in the life of the spirit, all else is transitory and of no lasting satisfaction, terminating in any case with death. "He who is here in man and he who is in yonder sun – both are one."⁹

Asleep © 2000



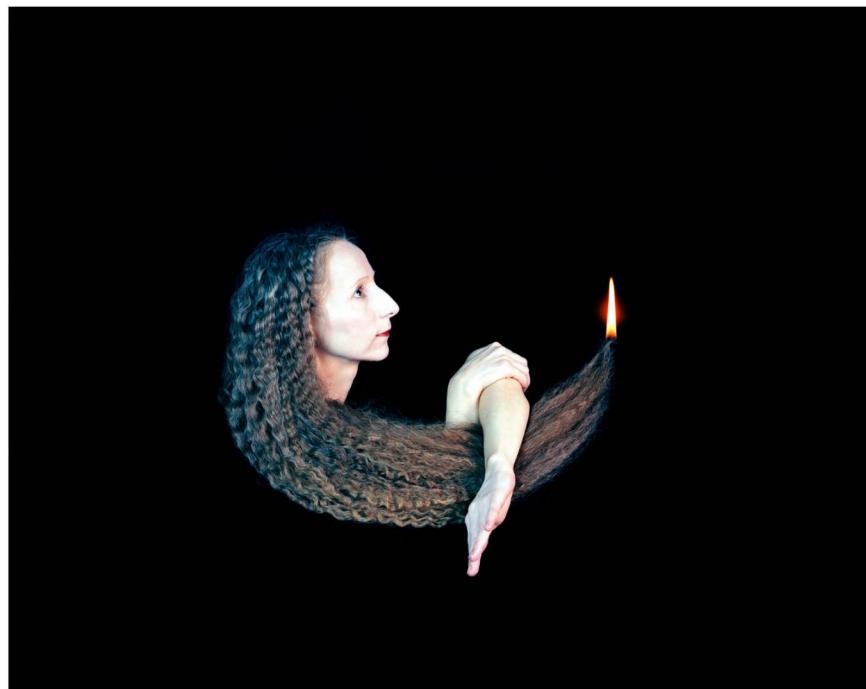
The quick look at the sequence of the photographs, roughly attested as *Perhappiness*, give an impression of something that one hopes to find, not assuming it will be found. The images are more the instrument of *perhappiness* than the expressions of its results. In depicting life as the quest for sublime experience, the visual concepts traffic hard in inspirational matters, which might wear on some people by keeping their thoughts on so high a plane. Of course, it does not always work that way, for any person, human in mind and heart, simply cannot be continuously uplifted to the contemplations of the sublime and the beautiful. Therefore, in *Perhappiness*, the constructive ideas are blended with imaginary hopes and unhappy real sorrows, but with all their many limitations, they allude to some preliminary steps in developing self-mastery and mastery of the surroundings. At least we thought that way, while working on our photographs.

Nobody knows much about the unknowable. No cool, rational argument is fit to cope with mystical events that require understanding through the heart. For some, that ability is innate, while others have to work hard “for free” and seemingly without results in order to obtain it. Often that entails the unmolding of both the inner and the outer existence, but only if one is not too sane in a commonsense way and still capable of jumping out of the circle of one’s mental habits, obstinate doubts, and predatory practicality. Of any such patterns and how to get rid of them, we have no definite knowledge, yet it is clear that they are richly compensated when they are transcended. In due course, one learns that the result of life is a result of an experience with high doses of *perhappiness*, while spiritual assimilation of what was experienced is very likely the most desirable result. With some sense of security, life can proceed on that assumption.

2: THE SELF

How might one look sailing a non-existent *Bark* in a vacuum? The traveler, the bark, and the oar all emerge from a single source, embodying the classical adage “all my things I carry with me.” In its original version *omnia mea mecum porto* with the usual economy of Latin words alliterated, the repeated “m” reaffirms the presence of “me” sonorously. Sailing over nothing – so we seemed to leave the eastern shore and sail to the western, traveling between reality and probability. We sailed off into the blue and did not look back. When one does not see boundaries, and cannot steer straight for the goal, which might be far off or even nowhere in the given world, one must be content to navigate cautiously and only approximately correctly. The ghost *Bark*, which seems

Bark © 1997



to have traveled beyond normal existence, could be risky to explore, besides, it might disappear like the Flying Dutchman whenever one gets close. That somewhat nautical picture must not be interpreted literally: it alludes not to the oceans that divide the continents but to the general waters of *samsara*. In such content, “waters” is just a technical term designating the desire, the need, the illusion, and everything else that keeps human souls tied to the physical world. With the little tricks of self-deception in art, one can travel from the real to the surreal and the superreal, with effects that are oddly promising. So “we gave three heavy-hearted cheers and blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic,” to borrow the seamen’s spirit from *Moby-Dick*.¹⁰

In painting, a ship often alludes to a symbol of the soul, coming from or departing for unknown shores. The ship is always considered a she, and she might float till she sinks. The primal waters are ambivalent: some boats glide gently down the stream of the world, while the others travel in the dark, with no direction and no prospect. Pulling a good oar, the lonely kind of a traveler has to surmount not only the “waters” but also the fear of abandonment, which aloofness and solitude might be consuming. In a way, and in a rather vulnerable way, a man’s life can be compared to an unpredictable voyage on a ship that, on a small scale, could be a boat or even a raft. Luck acts the part of the wind, working out its ends with the remorselessness of fate. Taking a marine model, the work of destiny might be illustrated by the saying: “Give your son luck and throw him into the sea.” Many mythological heroes tried to “master” the sea of *perhappiness* by leaving the arrangement of their destiny to chance, which, in fact, might have been predestined. Was not the biblical Noah predestined to survive the flood of bad luck? Nevertheless, floating over the shapeless water underneath the shapeless sky, he also had to rely on the survival kit of his own self.

Not only is *Bark* made out of the “self,” but many of our images also fit into this bare perspective; take the empty-handed *Skier* as an example. With the red pomegranate for a “buoy,” the “centaur,” part human, part skis, glides over the blackness of the imaginary snow. In the series *Perhappiness*, the unreal body is changed from picture to picture, similar to an actor’s costume worn for the performance and removed after it. The ethereal figures are usually so slight that they



Skier © 1998

seem all spirit and no body. One of the features characteristic of these works is that the real body is always absent, while the emphasis is consistently on the head, or rather, on what is inside it. Thoughts cannot be painted or photographed, and the mind has no substance of its own in visual art, yet it can make you feel you are its co-thinker, even if it is silent. By the black emptiness of the backgrounds, the photographs allude to the circumstances in which one's own existence might appear to be a fairy vision, hanging between earth and sky upon the empty clouds. There are too many waters of uncertainty to cross and it is difficult to survive in them; therefore, one must put one's faith in the bold and healthy mind. This is

a journey that one must take alone – for it is only the self that belongs to both strata: the realm of the eternal being and the world of perpetual becoming. Looking at the latter as if a seascape panorama, and with less pessimism than one might expect, we can picture it nautically. Roving in the waters of perpetual becoming, rowing towards the shore and for security, people navigate life by feelings, desires, mental grips, intuition, and what not. And each endeavor aims at deliverance – in that sense, we are all in the same boat.

Should deliverance be understood as reaching the eternal, one will be steering one's boat not only against the course of the world but also against the current of time and its linear

Oars © 2000



waves of the past and the future. Tapping one of the roots of the difficulties of the spiritual crusade, as artists, we had better give it a poetic slant rather than “owling” it like old philosophers with metaphysical solemnity. Going against the stream, the fervent recluse follows the inner light; and, even when discouraged in his pursuit, he persists in his quest. Looking for what he hopes to find, now consciously, now unconsciously, he has to rely on a grace residing in no dogma. In that, one needs freedom from ordinary rules and conventional beliefs. Bound upon a strange voyage that is not dependent upon actual motion, the mind, however intuitive it is, retains the air of a thinker, difficult to comprehend by other-minded and otherwise-trained persons. The faith is used as a beacon, the body as a boat, on which the soul crosses all currents of difficulties and fears. And in the end, as the shore has been reached, the boat is left behind.

In Genesis, the firmament divided the waters into above and below the ground. Perhaps, both of them are relatively safe for the boat that floats without sails and oars, like Noah who was shut up in his ark and moved by faith alone. The image that is “sailing” in our metal *Ark* is depicted in the mood of a relaxed serenity, and yet it might provoke an alarming feeling of dissolution of the boundaries of material reality, a spatial nowhere. With all its compositional similarity to Pre-Raphaelite Ophelia or Lady of Shallot, both enveloped in the atmosphere of death and decay, the passenger in the *Ark* is very much alive. The eyes are open and, gazing upward, encompass the mystical journey in the hour of trial – the hour when unreal things are real. The invisible water unites to the invisible sky; time is frozen in “elsewhere.” The phantom boat seems to lead not into this life but out of it, or rather, beyond it. It is as if the depicted state of ease is born of detachment, equanimity, and self-possession, and is no longer in suspense as to what is good or bad. With all these poetic implications, there is a further point to understand: necessity is born out of the natural world, while true freedom comes from the realm of grace.

Incidentally, the floating *Ark* was one of our last works made in Manhattan, before we crossed the Hudson River and settled in Rockland County. At that moment, we felt the urgent necessity to leave the metropolitan anxiety that hindered our new interests. Some odd sense of peace, which

was quite beyond our understanding, stilled and steadied our spirit when we recovered ourselves in solitude and were so closely surrounded by nature. Any tension backed by the valuable perspective has to have peaceful pauses for a sort of digestion of both the active sparks of knowledge and the bitter experience of tossing waters. In the occidental mythology, it is depicted by short periods of calm between the storms in the adventures of Odysseus.

We found strange security in that peace and not without some elements of self-mortification, infused with patience and perseverance. As one would expect, it was reflected in our art. In the tentative safety of the metal *Ark*, there is something that resembles the protective qualities of the sacred chest shielding from the deluge of extraverted waters. The deep emptiness of the black background enveloping many images is outside the chest, which security is questionable, it seems to be as transcendent as awesome. We were moved not



Ark © 1993, photos, metal

by self-hypnotic trance or intellectual pursuit, but by the necessity of our intuition, perhaps, too intensive at that moment. Here it should be pointed out that the watchfulness to your own insight also has its sad moments: sometimes you feel like a blade runner, balancing between two undesirable states, one is influenced by your little ego while the other is

the product of the big entangling world. Among many currents in the flow of perception, it is nearly impossible to preserve the sense of the essential self, which is far from the sense of the personal “me” fed by libido; even any comparison of the two must be based on an antithetical construction. By identifying with the ego and its cunning intelligence, one tends to draw all conclusions from appearances, losing, as it were, the center in the field of awareness.

What is this in us that we can call genuinely “myself” and that carries *omnia* within (described accordingly in many old reputable sources as omnipotent, omnipresent, and omni-

Insider © 2006, photo, metal



scient)? And what is the unique local point-self that is able to dissolve in an omnidirectional expansion? Shall we conceive it as an organizer of personality, an archetypal center within, or a spark of God? There is a part of the human self that must be accepted as an unclassifiable phenomenon of undoubted efficacy. Before even asking these questions, those who are destined to become in touch with the transhuman element within themselves, unwittingly begin to lose their confidence in the uniqueness and solidity of their social personalities. They find themselves entangled in some process that might be tentatively defined as a passive or active attunement to the self. Upon receiving some signal of nature, often even unaware of it, they gradually change their attitude towards life by following not the subjective needs, but the objective preferences – the attentive impulses of their souls, now and then ill-used, but indestructible and potent in their essence. Abiding by it, as faithfully as possible, one can find new energy everywhere, as within so without. However, if the initiated process is severely impeded and the developing trans-human element loses its support, it may compensate this loss with neurosis.

Speaking alchemically, the self “carves” itself out from the *prima materia*, which in a simple fairytale version could be illustrated by the story of Pinocchio – a piece of mercurial self that chiseled itself out of an old tree of life. The sense of the awkwardly self-controlled “me” is delivered from the bundle of little unrestrained “me,” which unconscious sensations are brunching in all directions from the tree of life. All things evolve, including man, and at a certain point, we are pushed to search for the central axis within us, which definition slips from our grasp but does not stop us from searching for it. Inquiring about the precise location of that self and what it looks like would be as profitable as any other unanswerable question. You may as well ask yourself: “Why does existence exist?” Or, taking the Kantian viewpoint, merely leave that very self to itself – *selbst an sich*. Whatever the case, we are only able to comprehend what our nervous system is able to filter.

Let it filter what it can, but on the numinous level, the telepathic connection of ideas is sure to happen. If ever we were to be immortal, we are immortal now – our kingdom is our souls. That may sound excessively high in expression,

but the candor of this belief can lift man above himself, above all things labeled as “culture,” making his entire mental library useless. The soul is active in the fluid reality underlying the rigid material forms, as such, it appeals to the imagination more quickly than it appeals to reason. The analytic mind tries to spell all answers; while in the creative world, characteristic presently of a superabundance of freedom in expression, everything is half-imagined, half *Ding an sich*. For art, dependent as it is upon the imagination, is never so fascinating as when its meaning is half hidden, a half thing in itself. That “semi-concept” finds its reflection even at the ordinary commonplace level. For example, the Venus de Milo

Hand Unveiled © 2001





Eyewitness © 1996

gets along pretty well without her arms, and similarly, the many antique male sculptures can do without their sexual termini. The human imagination easily restores them to their original pristine beauty, as if their solid forms are freed from the gravity in our minds.

Apparently, the imagination is especially affected by man's efforts to deal with the invisible. In early Buddhist art, the Buddha is represented only by his evident traces, i.e., by a Bodhi tree, a wheel of dharma, or his footprints, and never by a likeness. In the fluid reality as opposed to the rigid materiality, which is said to represent a small visible part of a vast cosmos, things might be very different from what we think

they are, including your own self, known under many names. Zen's "original face" in Western thought would be understood as a soul, while in Hinduism, it is the *atman*, the essence of an individual through which psyche, mind, and ego are "filtered." In modern medical classification, all that would be associated with the cortical and subcortical activity, which notion should be added to make this subject a little less vague and palatable for a sensible modern man who always likes to put a safe distance between himself and his hypothetical soul. Associating it (also hypothetically) with a holographic part representing the whole, as a unique pattern of wholeness, one could more easily envisage the soul (the self or the *atman*) as a part of infinite, all-pervading space, containing all possible universes, the part through which yogis try to return to the whole.

There is no separate "I" in perceiving an objective reality, and yet that is what we have at our everyday disposal. All events of human life are a part of the dialog between the integral self and the habitual feeling of myself accustomed to *la vie personnelle*. How then can one depict the subtle movements of the soul without reducing the body presence in the picture or at least making it half visible? The face of a person's spirit differs from its physical face, the body is more so. With this in mind, we wanted to render it visually, balancing halfway between weight and weightlessness, avoiding sensual anatomy lacking gentle grace. Art is meant to grow from the personal to the universal, at least that's what we imply, expressing our seemingly torrential creativity in the fluid flow of the issuing images that lack both a sense of time and a foothold in space. One can have an eerie feeling that they are like ghosts among the living that are left somewhere out of the frame; instead, horizonless darkness "fills" the empty background. The ethereal figures take on the strangest shapes, usually gracefully thin, with almost glasslike transparency showing how close to immateriality the body could be. They look like they are ready to break in half, seeking to reduce themselves to a minute particle as if suggesting that their consciousness is partly transferred from their physical bodies to their astral counterparts. Even if we accept that our physical body is the divinely appointed residence of our consciousness, we still cannot ignore the fact that we are only borrowing it from nature to which it will be eventually



Uprising © 1997

returned after its use. Therefore, feeling the invisible in some obscure way, we fashioned the images as if they are garments of the soul looking at its body as something apart from itself. Slight and diaphanous as their shrouds, the figures seem to be created to be crucified and vanish into space. The incorporeal status of spirit allows much flexibility: a single active force can take many different forms, which are apparently unlike, even though they are alike in fundamental purpose.

Turning now to actual practice, we admit that in our somewhat paranormal images, the bodies are sculptured by thought; by that, we do not mean that their source is entirely

mental, but rather they are somewhat mixed and diverse in character and content of each depicted symbolic experience. By imaging and photo documenting its results in progress, we record the continual interplay between our psyches or, to use the neurological denomination, our nervous systems and all other life systems with which we happen to come into contact resulting in the creation of that “inner show.” When filtered through visual art, each psychological experiment generates its own magnetic field and, similar to a human aura, relates more to the soul than to the body it inhabits. Even though such testimony would have very little weight with anyone disinclined to believe it, we say it again: the im-

Apple Triplet © 1999



ages are our thought-forms, stored as the data of self-consciousness. “Pushing” themselves into physical reality, they preserve their surreal plasticity with unique twists. We are not alone in suggesting that thoughts might be tangible things. There are testaments of patients who had near death experience noticed that when they stopped thinking their body disappeared, turning into some undifferentiated mist, and they had “to think” their composite body back. It seems that in that between-life state, Descartes’ dictum, “I think, therefore I am” is especially potent.

When the psychiatric observations are put back in the art context, the telepathic bursts of information emitted by the

Mimicry © 1998



self can be presented in a picture language because symbolic pictures can express such types of concepts that are beyond our comprehension. Alluding to an infinite number of natural miracles, the photographs depict them as an equilibrium of contraries that in itself is not without a psychological paradox. The images, however, do not suffer from sensory overload and their main tactical device is rather clear: using non-action in order to attain action. The tentative positive or negative feedback of our photographic *wei wu wei* (the act of non-action, in Sino-Tibetan practice) is shown in a variety of ways, reflecting different psychological reactions expected from rational creatures that are very different from each other (for some have better cognitive abilities than others). In short, with all the unreality of *Perhappiness*, its message composed of many symbolic images might be quite real.

In the context of *Perhappiness*, the self is seen on a scale between selfish and selfless forms of its appearances. Whatever the self is, wherever it has come from, and whatever it is up to seems to be a secret, but people may very well “witness” its presence within their own organisms. It is a secret of a multidimensional psychic universe that is invisible unless one employs an imagination. The self is only a half citizen of the body and far too vast to fit into the mind. We can capture just its shades and traces and never be objective in self-definition because being a part of that which we are defying always makes us partial.

Take for example the image *Tutorress*, depicting a doppelgänger in self-reference. The two figures are not a result of “halving” by mitosis in which cells divide into two equal daughter cells. In psychological reality as opposed to physical reality, the splitting is achieved using a projection: the *tutorress* conjures the *tutee* out of the self into existence by the dint of her constant gaze. With a tapestry of perceptions, the split projection can have torrential consequences, not only of an undesirable or positive nature but a combination of both, similar to an explosion mesmerizing as much by its abnormality as by its wonderment. If the negative outcome may bring bipolar disorder or seeing apparitions, the positive can stimulate the conquest of man’s dual identity – the ego and the self – while the double effect might result in an epiphany of perceiving oneself suddenly and apocalyptically. The ego and the self always try to teach each other how to live. The

most provocative thought about a unique “I” is that it is multivocal. Reduce its many voices to two, and you get “yourself” and its doppelgänger, as in *Tutoress*, which is split into



Tutoress © 1998

two figures that both resemble Ancient Egyptian pictographs (to be precise, the shape of the mother figure is a hieroglyph for a woman). The space between the ego and the alter ego could be narrow or wide, which is an arbitrary feeling since both of them are nothing but “I” throughout. Featuring the dialog between “I” and “me,” the picture presents certain visual

and psychological contradictions – you cannot sit in front of yourself unless you do it in your mind. The mirror reflection would not be enough for venturing deep into the psyche. How is it possible to observe the self if our self-referential observation is subjective? And what if any observation is of the same nature? Hidden deep inside, the self might not be as it appears to us, similar to the enigmatic carvings of human heads in the Peruvian Nazca desert. Not only can they be seen just when the light hits them at a particular angle, but also there have been strange instances when people photographed the bas-reliefs of the old faces, but on the negatives, they appeared young. Accordingly, our guess is that on negatives, all human souls must be young, no matter how old they might appear in the photographs.

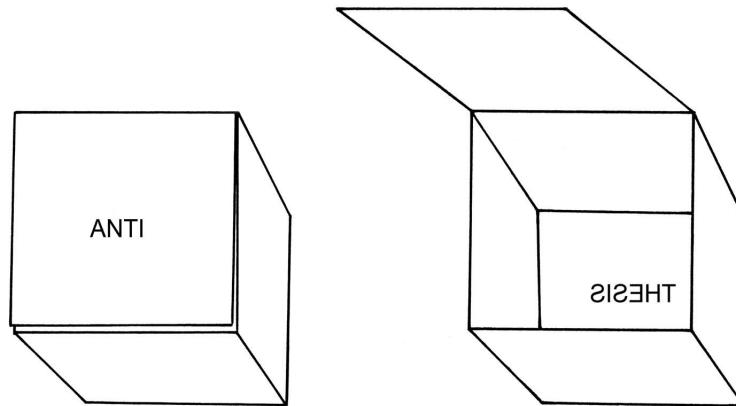
How people confront their projected images is described in literature profusely: the doppelgänger takes not only human forms but also apparitions of fiends and angels, and

V.G., *Double Head*, 1984, syringes,
wood, acrylic, 45.7 x 50.8 x 16.5 cm



even an appearance of things. The reflected image of the alter ego of a man (an image of an image) demands attention, it wants to live its own life in the manner of *The Nose*, the novella by Nikolai Gogol. This nose separated (God knows how) from the face of its owner and established its own life to the great confusion of its “parent.” The notorious organ, the euphemism of pride and sexual potency, no longer needed its progenitor. Likewise, the alter ego does not want to have any inconveniences in life, it does not want to age, cannot stand thoughts about death and dying, and wishes to be no less immortal than any other heavenly-perfected creature. In short, it wants everything. Examples of its hyperactivity would not be difficult to find in real life. An old woman we knew, who was a very ambitious artist, said right before she died: “I want everything.” The strong, well-trained ego does not let people off its hook until their last breath (we have no ability to follow the matter beyond this point to give a further report). As to Gogol’s novella, in which the inflated ego outwitted common sense quite shamelessly by indulging its desires that came out of the blue, its idea might be interpreted slightly differently: as an adventure, not so much of an alter ego as of the most extravagant antithesis of the self. If you say “no” to an antihero, it will spur him on to “yes,” and vice versa. Certainly, an antihero would be of no use if the thesis could reach synthesis without antithesis. In that context, the

R. G., *Antithesis* © 2005,
closed and open cube



popular formula “as above so below” might be expanded rather unconventionally, not in its affinity but as a contrast, when the below is seen as an antithetical image of the above, most surely, in the case of a minor ego with a major style.

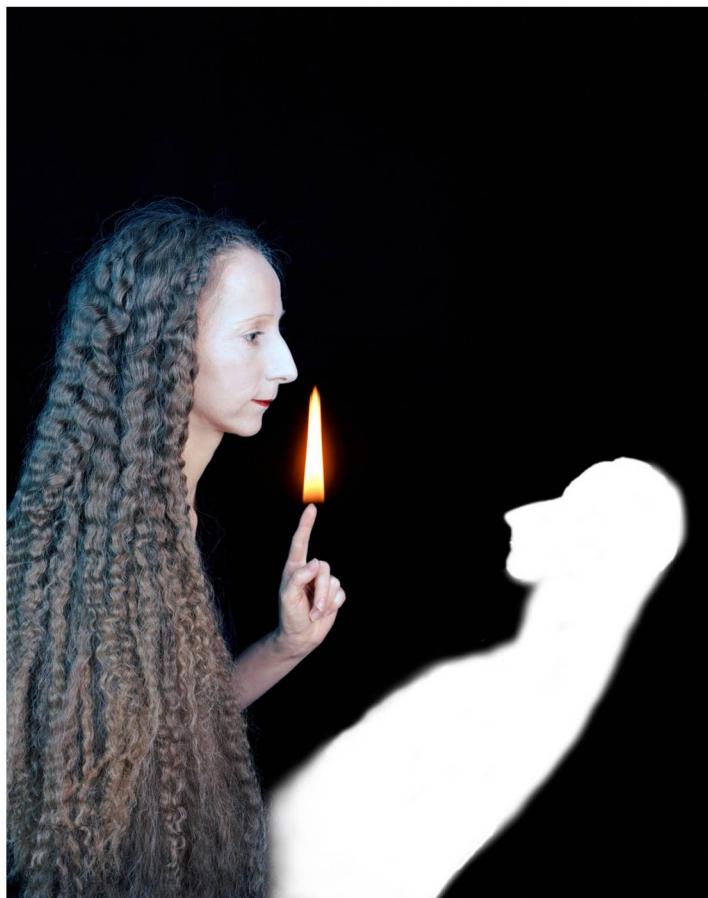
Remove the ego sense from an individual, and you wash away the solid ground from under his feet, leaving him in utter insecurity. Quietly laughing over that little drama, Nikolai Gogol extracted the ego from the personality, giving an opportunity to the nose to lead a single-dimensional existence, literally, in the flesh. The reader finds this nose in a state of most complete self-satisfaction, while its disappearance from the face of its owner warped his entire life. How could you have self-sufficiency and determination with your nose in absentia? Of course, *The Nose* is only an invention of the writer, while Tycho Brahe, the Danish astronomer of the sixteen-century, experienced its disappearance in real life. After he lost his nose in a duel, he adopted a gold one, which he attached to his face with cement. It is a slightly outrageous example, but still not irrelevant to the case at hand.

In dealing with the next part of the subject, we have to drop our parabolic and figurative style and plainly set forth the strange facts. According to his portraits, Nikolai Gogol had a rather prominent nose – the detail has never struck us quite in that light before. We wonder could he conceive this novella looking at the mirror. For they who desire liberation cannot avoid serious self-reflection to wear off the false predicaments that wrap around their ego. Having an extraordinary swift mind tinted with a morbid imagination, did Gogol ever think about getting rid of his ego, associating it with the nose? The fact that he immersed himself deeply in religious studies in his later life makes this question perfectly valid. Following the precepts of his favorite book *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, he might think about denying his ego, subconsciously allegorizing it as a nose. By burning the manuscript of his last novel, he seemed to deny not only his ego but also his talent, for creativity might not survive without an ego principle. At the time of crisis, despair breeds its own desire for self-punishment. In religious practice, a sacrifice of ego was often associated with the sacrifice of a limb, as it was in the case of St. Lucy, who, according to the legend, tore out her eye and sent it on a dish to her undesirable suitor. Some legends come to us as facts; while some

facts become legendary, think of Van Gogh, who cut off his ear. The examples of self-mutilation are innumerable; they carry unsatisfactory answers (if they are), revolving helplessly around the same question.

Let us give this somber theme another spin. No doubt, everybody has met someone whose ego is just like the wayward nose or dejected neurotic ear. Some people behave as if they are only one organ; and we say, he is nothing but one big stomach, she is one big smile, or he is an entire brain. The organs may wander like a floating kidney or vagus nerve. Metaphorically, we can lose our hearts, wear them on our

Shadow © 1997,
cutout of the print



sleeves, or have them in our boots. Even if we can consider a “one-organ” individual genuinely predetermined, in the sense that the outcome of his initiatives is somewhat predictable, his character always would be drawn by secondary factors, not by the self.

SELF FLESH

Indeed, a natural man follows the pattern of his nature that is continuous within the rest of nature, which is empty of ego. A hen knows how to lay its eggs. Being as natural as a

Egg Feet © 2001





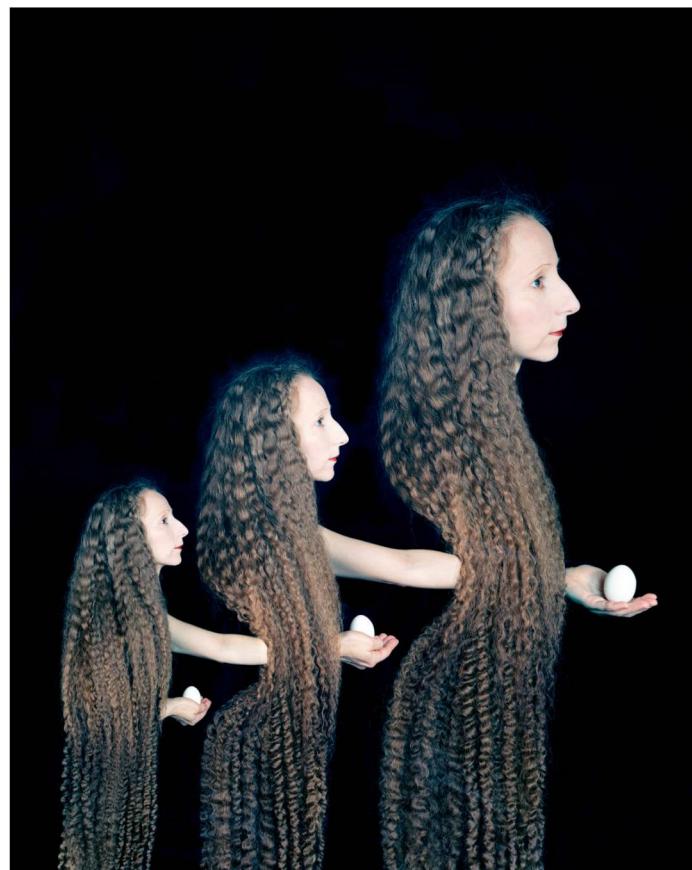
Retina © 1997

hen, man is able to keep all signs of egotistic striving out of his life. If we refer to the primal being within each individual subconsciously inheriting the genetic memory of humankind, it is natural for him to throw himself into the arms of Nature with its egoless and selfless state. Egoless identification with the world according to the Tao does not deny the existence of the ego; however, it no longer belongs to its progenitor. The investigation of an egoless spontaneity has found its way into European tradition too: it is vividly explored in various novels about narcissist libertines dreaming of joining a gypsy tribe or actually joining one and not being able to adjust to it. Its nomadic members are depicted as half-mental half-mam-

mal, disorderly ambivalent and endearingly innocent, or put differently, reduced to naked, vegetative egotism. Their tribal Tao maintains their natural existence and harmonizes with their uninhibited nature. Chance becomes their trademark, which they follow as a compass. But that seemingly egoless state is far from the quality of the Buddhist concept of having “your own non-center” or emptiness within – these two egoless states are as far as earth is from heaven.

By randomizing each choice, one does not lose one’s ego, but scatters it, multiplying the number of opinions – the crowd of them, leading in every direction. Sometimes, they seem to come not from within but from somewhere else, from

Easter Parade © 1998



the ocean of wavering incoherent egos, appearing from some dark area of the soul with which only nature, with all its physical world collectively, is in close communication. With that kind of “nobodyness,” everyone can confirm one’s own heresy, as well as everybody else’s, while doing it with an amiable superficial smile and self-indulgent assertion of a man whose individuality is inseparable from the great generality. When falsity is confirmed more readily than truth, the distance and misunderstanding between people only increases. If such a dehumanizing effect is a result of imitation of nature, what could be more unnatural for humanity? That is how the world is pressing down on us and drowning

Leafy Hand © 1998



us in the instinctive motherly nature that demands our adjustment to its law ominously called necessity. In other words, the ego, as natural in its desires as a hen laying its eggs, cannot be overcome by the exaltation of its spontaneity and randomness.

On the scale of the character between an undemanding natural man and an excessively conceited individual, between an underdeveloped and overdeveloped ego, there are so many intermediate points of interest that can give us reason to scorn or to praise them. Everybody is not equal in their ability to overcome the double shadow: some can reduce their self-importance to a minimum, some do the opposite, polishing theirs to perfection, and still, others carry theirs to absurdity and drive themselves and others mad. Othello was “led by the nose as asses are” (i.3), to give the tale of the nose a classic ending.

More than everything, the ego loves power, emulating examples of its great masters. The marble-like bust of *Nero*, made in a pseudo-antique style, is a collective archetype of the ruler. Emperor Nero seemed to be the most suitable for that role, representing something like an arithmetic mean of all tyrants, as he was a moderate reformer, an unrestrained villain, and an average actor in his soul. As with many other tyrants, he began his reign with reforms “in the name of people,” but enchanted by his power, he gradually usurped it and ended badly. The wonder is not that a winner of power might be so bad (*Nero* was guilty of matricide, fratricide, and uxoricide, killing his mother, brother, and wife), but that there was any good left in him. Philosophizing a little upon life in the atmosphere of ponderous dignity, any reasonable or unreasonable ruler is prone to deceive himself (and others) by considering himself honest and just. But history does not always encourage such hope, so his self-image exists in theory without application, while his intensive egotism can gradually dry up all sympathy for him.

The exalted power in its distilled form has no measure and brings no peace; it intends only to rule and subdue, facing the truth with a whip – concisely, one is too powerful to be wrong, as a court jester might put it. The truth is a luxury that a little handful of people can afford while the rest must be diplomatic. Like everybody, the powerful ego has its bad days of being irritated by signs of justice, honesty, prudence,

ethics, and other disturbing miscellanea. Usually, the victor becomes dependent on his own victory, his power over the world, consequently finding himself in the bonds of this very world over which he is a ruler. Behind the exalted sense of control, its instinctual and egotistic forces, there is the same biological factor that determines the leader in animal herds and makes a big fish swallow a smaller fish. Even the average person of non-vegetarian habits, that is to say, with an appetite for the flesh of other living beings, subconsciously demonstrates the same aggressive instinct with which nature endowed the carnivores. From the spiritual point of view, it has a potentially harmful effect; one can only choose the lesser evil, for the degrees of the expression of the aggressive instinct vary immensely.

R. G., *Nero*, 1984,
wood, canvas, foam,
acrylic, 60 x 48 x 13 cm



The bust of *Nero* is an *objet d'art* and at the same time is a specimen of his majesty kind: the cubes with the names of different emperors, kings, presidents, dictators, and party leaders share his genetics of autocracy. Their miniature busts are drawn on all sides of the cubes similar to repeating geometric fractals, each being a small copy of their progenitor. Among them are such names as Xerxes, Genghis Khan, Lenin, Agamemnon, Peter the Great, Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm, Ptolemy, and others, altogether fifty-four plenipotentiaries, which “scepters” are passing from one hand to another, maintaining their cohesive latent power at all times and in all places. The ablest minds among them spend their genius on contriving instruments of control over other men’s lives. They have a halo around their selfishness and live as they wish, but not always die in a manner that pleases them. Snakes do not die from their own poison, but the oppressors might. They are killed, now and then; but in general, God had been very patient with His power elite. Power excites, intoxicates, and corrupts – “absolute power corrupts absolutely” – and the “crowded” bust of *Nero* rests on the laurels of that well-known axiom.

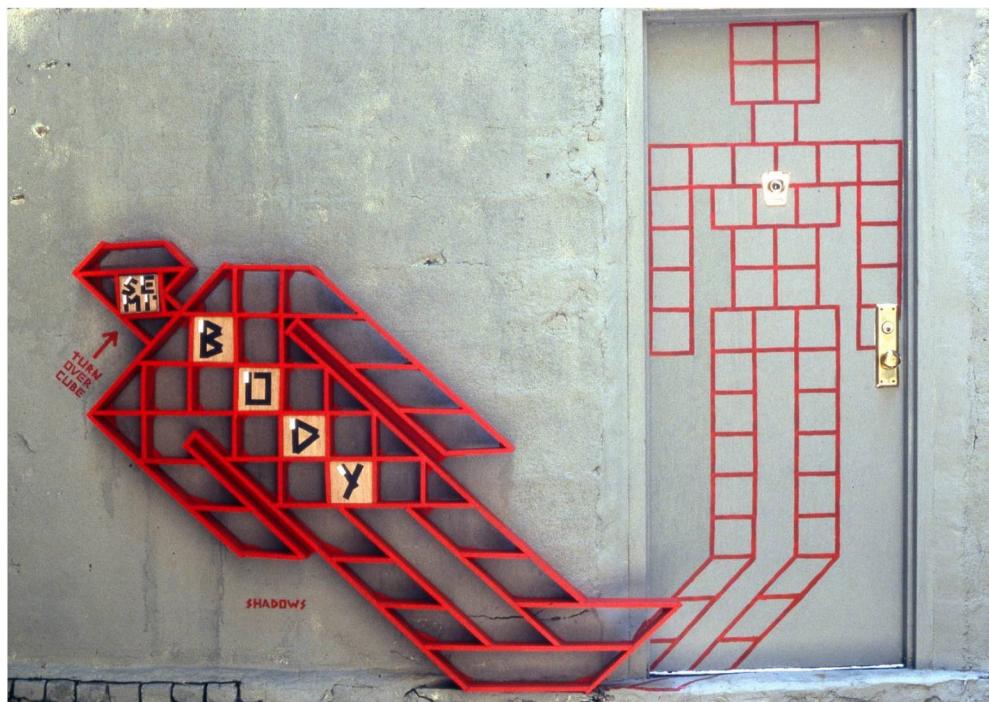
Perhaps we have to stop in the midst of what promises to be an exaggeration for an intelligent man, especially that of a nonutilitarian character who is free from delusions of personal power. Yet, one has to admit that certain patterns of the superego are repeated on a small scale in the characters of ordinary mortals. The ego, every single one, is interested in maintaining control, at least up to a certain degree. Its self-interest is the guiding star; that is why people tend to be very hard on the weaknesses of others and rather tender to their own. But human behavior is far from being so simple: the ego can show spiritual inclinations and present itself as a friend of humanity, not less crafty than any president. It can stage a superficial play of a narrow, opinionated intellectuality and show many other sophisticated tricks. The list of its credentials is potentially endless. Instead of writing spicy words of criticism, let us look at that subject with the eye of an artist and see how visual examples may link the words and thoughts together at a different plane.

The object *Shadow* is born of the permutation of its own items: the rational and the irrational, meaning that it’s not the body casting its shadow, but the vertical shadow casting the

slanting body. Open the door, and the two-dimensional sketch of the shadow is animated, while the three-dimensional body remains nailed to the wall. The mutable psycho-physical individuality that man calls "I" or "myself" is depicted here as some spectral thing – a delusion of the instinctual ego. The *Shadow's* ID, to speak conventionally, is coded by the prefixes inscribed on the brain cube. Each side of that cube bears the beginning of the word that ends with "-body" written across the figure: thus, turning over the cube, one can make of this body some-body, any-body, every-body, semi-body, under-body, and no-body. For as long as these six voices alternately speak in one mind, what is right for one voice would be wrong for the other.

Photographing different parts of the self while trying to put them together as a whole, we cannot avoid mentioning

R. G., *Shadow*, 1987, wood, acrylic,
77 x 203 x 13 cm, Zeus-Trabia Gallery,
New York, 1987



certain signs and signals of the ego, and very unpleasant ones they are. In the world of “ten thousand things,” with which the human brain cannot stop working on, a natural man is illuminated by his own instincts mixed with the stimuli from the outer world and gets into a mess with his personal reflections. He is a tourist in his own life. Should he fit the profile of an introvert, he can be locked up with nothing but images of itself, and if he doesn’t watch out, they may swallow him up. There are second, third, and even multiple personal reflections of which we are dimly aware of, if at all. In the mirror of self-consciousness, all these reflecting shadow figures and doublets pit their magic not only against their owner but also against each other. The ego-complex increases and becomes notoriously active under the many masks of its doubles that continuously efface the true entity. Strong and steady, this complex is felt like a wall that one can’t break down or climb over.

The “I” is composed of many thoughts which linebreeding may be charted more or less explicitly. The thinking process plays on itself in the mind that cannot exist independently of the thoughts which are passing incessantly, some meteor-like. They seem to be a part of some tale from a looking-glass world, in which the shadow figures and their doublets pit their forces against each other. As if in limbo, the soul is watching its own shadows outperform each other in the world of their own making, which they believe to be shared by everybody else. Even if it is only a metaphor – a gross picture of a gross mind – it reflects some aspects of reality, once that most of us do not want to notice. What emerges from this attitude is the one-sided perceptive. Being the creator of its own universe, the ego realizes itself in a thought process and in spite of its fluctuating states of mind, it is seized by a goal – the metaphysical goal of egotism. As such, it loves to show its free will, which impetus increasingly depends on the cleverness of a corrosive kind. If left unchecked, the bad habits tend to become second nature, which might culminate in unholy selfishness. That is when the safety-valve is off.

Linguistically “ego” cannot be divided into two, but only into three parts: “e,” “g,” and “o,” subliminally suggesting that in its distorted mirror it reflects the deformed image of the Trinity and the tripartite constitution of a man (spirit,



Gerlovina, Berghash, Gerlovin, *Ego*
© 1988, photo, metal, diam. 66 cm

soul, and body). Juggling with the three letters of “ego,” we can reshuffle it into “geo,” thus drawing attention “geo-logically” speaking, to its earthbound existence. If there is a choice between spiritual and agricultural pursuits, the ego will choose the latter, for physical activity, superficial intellectual curiosity, and a dozen harmless vanities would keep it balanced. All kinds of activities keep it from addressing the idea of dying, which is linked in its mind to emptiness and deprivation. The classical definition of physical death is the separation of soul and body; then to which would the impermanent ego cling? Being a driving motor of the physical nature, it would see more profit in the material body than in the non-material soul. At that point, prudent people tend to end the idle reasoning saying something clever, kind of

of James Joyce's remark, "Let us have theories there and return to here's here."¹¹

The higher perceptive faculties are asleep in most humans, but that does not inhibit one's fascination with the fine phrases on account of their souls. We often hear that humanity is within nature but not of nature, and yet man's ego remains a landmark in his understanding of the makeup of the world, and the latter is never going to be any better when based on the self-oriented moral standards. The ego is a contradiction, so we all are. As a combination of many forces, it is in a constant struggle within: it is all action, all desire, all hope periodically contradicted by melancholy, doubt, or disobedience. The mind is never at rest, if not giving up the ways of vice. The situation changes when intelligence tries to oppose desire and passion. That struggle, however, is uneven because the impulsive nature rebels against

R. G., *Humanoids*, 1985,
wood, fabric, foam, acrylic

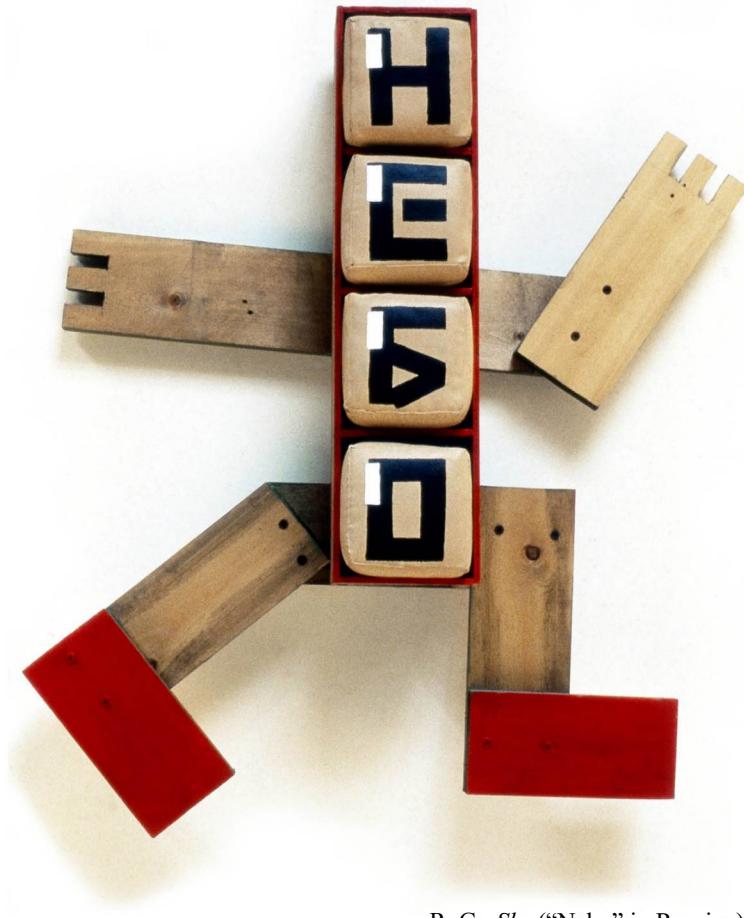


the voice of judgment with the stubbornness of the player resolved to win. With vigor and persistence, the intellect is not able to slay the multi-vocal ego by analyzing it obsessively. As the old myth goes, in order to slay the snake-headed Medusa representing low instinctual forces and not to be turned to stone, Perseus must not look at her.

People may act with an air of perfect naïveté both in good and bad faith. Their inner barometer rises and drops from self-righteousness to self-pity when they try to sum up all that constitutes their “self” and its moral standards. In art, their orbit cannot be charted with precision. The common sense (and uncommon too) reflections on their vicissitudes literally inspired the series *Humanoids* representing kinds of self-fragments of exaggerated instincts. *Humanoids* are a crowd of people not easy to live with; their little egos are mischievous and dangerous. *Anima bruta* can take many forms: one is an ever-marching pioneer, the other is a striped, numbered convict; there is a person with suicidal inclinations, an ear-headed artist emulating the ominous experience of Van Gogh, and many others not less weird. Taking a separatist position, the ego is acting as an actor on the stage and, excited by being watched, does exactly that what it is tempted to do and pays the penalty for it. Even if it suffers, it cannot stop speculating about what impression its suffering makes upon others.

The vital instinct survives almost all afflictions, blindly fastening itself to all the possible support it can find, similar to a climbing ivy fastening its tendrils. It hopes to be saved, and usually is, by the same instinct that drops a cat on its feet. The better the ego settled in life, the stronger and self-assured it is under any condition, as in the case of two “confident” women looking at their reflections in the mirror: the pretty one believes that it reflects her true entity, while the ugly one is sure that it does not. The best method of cultivating the hyperbolic “me,” brought face-to-face with its nagging conscience, was elaborated by Joseph Heller: “I refuse to accept such reality; I dump it all right down into my unconscious and sit on it as hard as I can. Let it all come out in bad dreams if it has to. I forget them anyway as soon as I wake up.”¹² One can feel safe with one’s own timid but tenacious self, shining like a beacon in one’s egotistical darkness.

And yet, even among the *Humanoids*, there are excep-



R. G., *Sky* ("Nebo" in Russian) written vertically, wood, fabric, foam, acrylic, 69 x 68 x 15 cm, 1985

tions who try to surpass the boundaries of their little individuality. Aspiring upwards with his entire androgynous being, the anthropomorphic *Sky* is dreaming that he is not of this world. His little wooden body is filled with the soft cubes each bearing a letter; together they form one simple but very capacious word "nebo" (sky), derived from the same Greco-Roman source as English "nebula." After all, we all share the sky over our heads. Written on the body (and mind) of that humanoid, this sky-oriented word symbolizes vertical thinking as opposed to horizontal, which grounding and gravitational forces are adapted to suit material goals. Unlike the rest of his family with a disordered libido, this good-natured

brute with his little self-fragment of the sky tries to filter his “I” through aspiration. A good many people have known such states of mind, though, perhaps not all in the same degree. The sky is the limit.

While the world endures and man is a man, it is virtually impossible to get rid of the ego. Even to expose it may not be easy, since people do not notice the difference between their true entities and the persistently clinging ego. The given circumstances are not to be disregarded because the negative feedback loop supports and stimulates this difference. Add to this the syndrome of our time bringing a notable “progress” in the physiological reorientation of human beings that tend to cultivate their biological basis in exchange for ethics and intelligence. The instinctual and ego-driven tendencies are dangerous in that they can turn people, before they know it, into body-conscious “poultries,” deceived by their digitally updated minds. In that sense, it would be interesting to look at the gruesome statistics published in *Poultry Science* magazine that *The New York Times* used for a colorful simile: “If humans grew as quickly as the ‘Chicken of Today,’ a three kilogram (6.6 lbs) newborn baby would weigh 300 kilograms (660 lbs) after two months.”¹³ Of course, an exaggeration of that hash simile far outruns the reality, but as a metaphor, it might be getting near it.

In the East, the ego is explained as an illusion, a deception of self-deception, a phantom without substance, while in the West brooding over psychotherapeutic concepts, we mainly complain about its key factor – egotism. If the ego is a pivotal expression of the psyche (not the consciousness), egotism would be merely a result of the malfunction of an unsubordinated ego or perhaps its functional residue. Even if all life is an illusion (which for the Western mind has the flavor of a legend rather than reality), the ego can at least feel the difference between pleasant and painful illusions, either enjoying them or pitying itself in distress. As to the latter, in certain situations, one can be even crucified by one’s own ego and get a psychedelic kick out of it. With supposedly altruistic or spiritual intentions, any selfish individual would be merely working for himself. Putting personal interest in front of any argument, the ego always comes to a conclusion based on its own selfish standpoint, usually less than right. And unconscious of its selfishness, it thinks that justice is done

and sleeps the sleep of an innocent. It is said that only when the sky falls, blind men will catch larks.

The soft encyclopedia *Who Is Who* is the collection of “tactile metaphors” for all kinds of egos: little, big, and everything in-between. The unordinary form of the encyclopedia is matched by its pseudo-literary content: the linen bag contains 42 cushions with self-determining IDs. Each cushion has its own personality introduced on its label: if some of them could be called humans, others are inert objects or abstract notions, including something indeterminable. All personae differ by gaudy outfits but are of the same form and softness; each of them proclaims its distinct individuality, which in its ego’s fundamental principle is identical to the rest of *Who Is Who*.

“I am the best”

“I am you”

“I am Gog and Magog”

“I am in the bag”

“I am a minister of life”

“I am non-human”

“I am an idol”

“I am a fool”

“I am nobody”

“I am a spermatozoon”

“I am 8 1/2”

“I am a New Year”

“I am a mandala” ...

Each “I am” remains its own person, belonging, however, to a single collective bag, which means, *inter alia*, that each ego-consciousness has not yet been differentiated into a separate unit. As a pseudo-encyclopedia of the embryonic ego-concepts, *Who Is Who* presents a good many libidos with many passions and little wisdom. They are children of nature branching from, so to speak, proto-ego and demonstrating to us what might be natural and unnatural in our lives. The primordial essence of all principles of life finds its expression in multiplicity, especially at its peripheral ends, crawling with animate and inanimate life: with innumerable heads, hands, tentacles, and objects, in short, with all forms that ever existed. The roots of all entities and things are in their archetypal source that goes through many layers and spheres of existence, varying only in the degree of density of vibration:



Who Is Who, soft encyclopedia, 1977, 42 labeled cushions in the canvas bag,
56 x 41 x 26 cm

from the highest spiritual codes to the lowest form of matter. Thus, the divine essence objectifies itself through its subjective forms and appearances; and some of them might be ambiguously illusory.

Back in 1977, we had no idea that our spontaneous concept of *Who Is Who* has the ancient roots. Years later, we traced them in *Bhagavad Gita*, in the episode where Krishna shows prince Arjuna His many forms, simultaneously existing in the world while objectifying His Divine "I am" in all kinds of principles and incarnations. "I am the sacrifice, I am the blood-oblation, I am the mantra, I am the flame and the offering (9.16); I am the gambling of the cunning, I am the splendor of the splendid, I am resolution and victory (10.36); I am the scepter of the rulers, I am the silence of things, I am the secret and the knowledge of the knower."(10.38) In parallel, the early Gnostic apocrypha *The Thunder, Perfect Mind* of the Nag Hammadi Library found in Egypt contains the similar objective-subjective antitheses. "I am the first and the last (13.1); I am the silence that is incomprehensible and the idea whose remembrance is frequent (14.11); I am strength and fear, I am war and peace (14.33); I am the substance and the one who has no substance" (18.30). "I am the one who

alone exists, and I have no one who will judge me. For many are the pleasant forms which exist in numerous sins, and incontinences, and disgraceful passions, and fleeting pleasures, which men embrace until they become sober and go up to their resting-place. And they will find me there, and they will live, and they will not die again.”¹⁴

While undergoing its molding, the ego has at least in part to obey the consciousness and reflect not only sub-human interests towards survival but also the higher ideas – what little there would be of them, but still, there might be something. Man is the point of intersection of the universal lines of forces, the crossroad of their conjunctions and oppositions,

Cubic Apple © 1997



therefore to bear the myriads of their influences there must be some kind of stability and unification of the fragmented individual. Even if we can theoretically control the force that rules us subconsciously, at times we are driven by exigencies to obey it. The growth of the consciousness requires the presence of an ego at the preliminary stage, at which the ego must not be destroyed – egotism is what has to be destroyed, but not the ego. At that point, it functions as a necessary shell for the soul, as a kind of temporary scaffolding supporting the inner structure in the transitional periods. As such, it has to be brought into subjection to the best in us, something that, in the phraseology of mystics, is capable of having divine com-

Nucleus © 1998



munications, not known to the lower impulses. In other words, if one is able to disidentify oneself from one's ego, the individual ego remains, but the attitude towards it is changing. To be different from the outside world and other selves, the ego must be sufficiently developed or, better to say, molded and built up as a serviceable unit. Besides, how can you disidentify yourself from what you do not have? One cannot get rid of the ego if it does not yet exist, at least temporarily. Moreover, it has to be already sufficiently consolidated, before it can serve as a starting gate for the further development and be able to endure its last stage of "castration." On the treadmill of the periphery and the center, the ego finds itself between the body and the soul, between the sensuality feeding the human appetite for daily life and the self, in which everyone carries *omnia mea*.

Without trafficking into individual psychology, we would say that generally the ego is outwardly oriented rather than internally focused. The primary functions of the natural brain are facilitated by adaptation to external reality. With snatching a secure place for itself under the sun, the ego is usually rather practical; it likes to impress with its power and wealth, for a rich person can allow oneself everything, even virtue. The process of the ego's formation is not without deviations. The literary genre gives us an entire cartography of its outward activity enriched with various forms of deviations: it is enough to open any novel. The ego may be inwardly oriented too, though usually, it is quite extroverted. If an egotist happens to be an introvert, the picture is reversed: losing connection with the external life, he will be obsessively reasoning about his own reasoning "I." In running a vicious circle of solipsism with self-oriented intensity, the ego will think and think about itself. The more it does, the worse it becomes. One can feel in some manner imprisoned by one's own self-preoccupation, locked tête-à-tête in one's own egotism with its contractive self-love.

With the appearance of new altruistic ideas in mind, the sand under the ego's feet is gradually washing away. The process is safe if in parallel to it the ego would stop colonizing the spiritual essence hidden within. Maintaining the difference between the genuine and the imposter – the self and the ego – one can shake the confidence of the latter in its uniqueness and solidity. When the subjective is gradually taking



Out of the Shell © 1997

an objective form in the subtle intellect, the mind begins to be conscious of the difference between the psycho-physical mechanism of ego and the omnipresent self. Splitting into duplicates is also the unique feat of the DNA helix and its basic genetic secret. To come to the point, the ego in its genetic nakedness and its impetus to seek after pleasures arises from the sense of separation from the self.

Digging a little deeper into history, we find that in many traditions, the real Self is the eternal root, pervading all, while everything else is but mortal. Yoga practice leads to “the path on which the self is united to the Self and the Self to the

All.”¹⁵ The ancient Chinese compared the self to the candle in the middle of a circle of mirrors. Working as a lens of the creator’s rays, each self contains a reflection of the whole universe. As a nucleus of the human being, the self is prior to thinking, feeling, and acting. In Mithraism, each candidate for initiation into the mysteries was put on the lion-couch in the middle of the octagonal chamber walled by mirrors made of polished metals. Locked in endless mazes of mirrors, he was supposed to get in touch with his soul and to become “aware of his own face.” Seeing visions of things invisible, the seeker seemingly steps into the quantum leap accelerator, to present the old practice in modern terms. There he could find himself in the latent realm beyond the ego’s reach, where one single soul and all other souls are different, and yet they are the same. In that sense, the looking glass self-reference in itself is a paradox of infinite regress.

The dimension, to which we all are confined, is like a two-faced mirror: one reflects the reality of our spatiotemporal boundary, measured with space and time, while the other is a transcendental reality with “at-one-ment” of all and everything at any time. The human being is the focus where this two-faced mirror reflects the intersection of subconscious and conscious projections, thus maintaining an intermediate position between the hidden and the obvious, the invisible world and the world of outer forms. And even if one always believed, like Aristotle, that a straight line is the shortest journey between two points, in this mirror, these two points, although apart, share the same place. There is a good deal of overlapping that is explainable by the idea of the wave-substance underlying material reality in the fluent universe. Each self is a center where these waves meet, thus uniting itself with all other selves built alike. The dissolving of the individual boundaries leads to the awareness that even though that self is all that exists, it is not merely one person. “Self within all things is seemingly different, it changes according to whom it enters,” says *Katha Upanishad* (11.5.10), suggesting that the Self chooses both its own bodies and its individual selves belonging to the same subtle essence pervading all life, including you.

If we are to sketch the differences between the self and the ego, employing the same metaphor, the ego-side mirror can be described as a *speculum mentis* (mirror of the mind)

that tricks us exactly like a mirror, in which we can see our own struggle with the world and the self. The active substance of the mind is continually changing its forms being fluent in



Mirror © 1994, photos, metal

reflecting all impressions around in a pool of its associations. The self is always inwardly at rest, while the ego is perpetually restless in its *perhappiness*. That indicates the difference between the two in their kinetic qualities. Do we really need to go beyond this looking glass, where we are periodically tossed by the unconscious, without our volition and consent?

Inwardly reoriented, the ego might imitate some spiritual qualities of the self, declaring after Heraclitus, “I sought for myself,” nevertheless, it does not change its substance. When the ego investigates the mystery of the self, it is like one “I” is searching for another “I” of the same quality. In its loneliness, the ego becomes too leery, perhaps even grumbling and inclined to overanalyze everything, including itself, and in its solipsism, it may easily befriend a ghoul of supernatural egotism. With all its introspection, the ego cannot see with its eyes or its mind the spiritual aspect of the reality, which light would be upsetting and irritating for an egotist. Speaking about that two-sided subject in somewhat proportional terms,

Hearth © 1997



the self might be thought of as light within and darkness without, while the outwardly oriented ego has light outside but inwardly remains dark. The ego's religion – what little there is of it – is quite simple: safe and useful. Should its spiritual zeal be of a highly imaginative ambition and indeed receive the "call," all its revelations will remain a matter of secondhand vision that by its very nature is obscure. If it is not just a commoditization of spirituality, that obscurity might be explained by the immanent deficiency in objectivity that is typical of the subjective mind. The self, which content the ego is trying to understand, is conceptualized and analyzed not by the self, but by some secondary faculties from

Duality © 2000





Measure © 1998

the ego's arsenal. With all its universal self-references to existences within all that exists, this type of reasoning errs because it measures the self with its measure. That might be like living in a psychic saga while the self is never contaminated, neither by the psychiatric theories nor by the affairs of the world, both impelled by the bittersweet chaos of the ego. In our view, when one tries to throw the mental chaos away as some kind of garbage, there is no need to analyze its content. The mutable psychophysical individuality is not the self. Thinking of all the cells that compose of your individuality, do they really belong to you? Do you sometimes have a

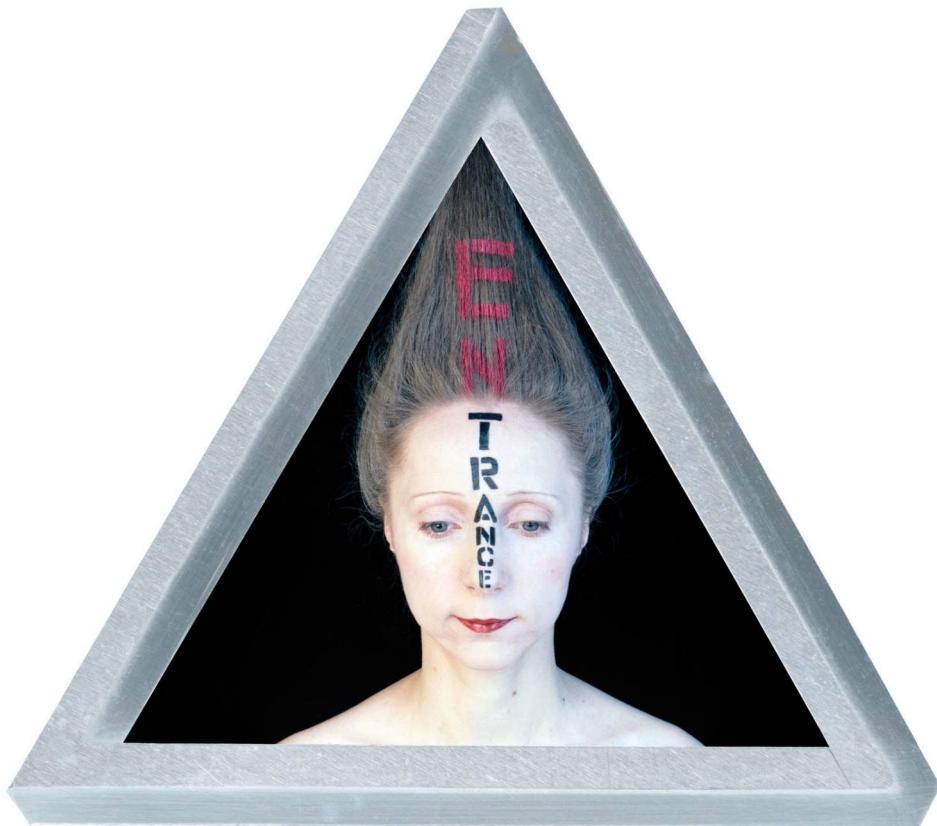
feeling that something in you is not yours? An interesting fact is that babies do not distinguish clearly their own person from others; in their perception, the external world and their personas are blended, and there is no sharp demarcation between the two. Considering the influence of heredity and environment upon our characters, it might be assumed that we do not even fully own our ego, which is the sum total of our biological entity and its psychic field, both impelled by inherited parental impulses representing forces of nature. As microcosm reflects macrocosm, the self is also the sum total, but of a different kind. It is a summation of all previously known of “me” in all possible aspects: everything “I” ever did and everything that was ever done to this “I” at any time. All of that is concentrated in the speck, or rather in a spark of consciousness, a pure one, but in spite of its inherent purity, it reflects the images passing through the mind like in a mirror.

In theological terms, the self is the link between our mind and the “mind” of God, the Self of the self, transcendent and immanent. This is the ancient adage best viewed from a great distance, from another time and another perspective. In Zhuang Zhou’s opinion, the pivot of Tao is the state in which self and non-self are no longer opposed to each other. In Hinduism, the *atman*, symbolized by the swan, is identified with the individual soul and the universal soul, which are said to be one and the same – if all is God, you are also included. Naturally, that concept was known in the West as early as the pre-Socratic philosophers considered likeness to God (*homoiosis*) the aim of human life. In Plato’s view, the soul and the heavens were intricately bound together, for the soul of the entire cosmos was created from the same substance as human souls. The concept of Plotinus gives us the key to their further integration: the soul of the world contains within itself the individual souls, which are both distinct from each other and not distinct. A less personal approach is peculiar to ancient Hebrews, which, according to the criterion of cultural anthropology, understood themselves as part of the corporate being “Father Jacob,” as his twelve tribes descending from his twelve sons. On a Hebrew monotheistic basis, Christ was called “the image of God,” and man was supposed to become the “image after the image,” denoting man’s participation in the image of God. In Gnostic terms,

Christ is both the process and its result. Humanity's antiques left us many similar patterns that can be recapped in *Katha Upanishad* line: "There is one eternal thinker, thinking non-eternal thought." (II.5.13)

It would be tempting here to sketch some parallels between the above ideas and that of early science; for example, Leibniz's hypothesis that the universe is constituted out of "monads," each of which contains a reflection of the whole. All particles of the human essence are pervaded by the spirit. Gottfried Leibniz seems to have a foretaste of what is known as a modern concept of holography, which, of course, is not for the artists to discuss at length. We just mention that it states that the physical reality constitutes only a *small part* of an infinite and sentient nonphysical cosmos and that our bodies are holographic projections of our consciousness. Here too, the backward parallel with the religious context continues: the self is always in the spiritual world even when incarnated and guided by the ego, which biological territory also represents only a small part of what is called an entire existence. Remaining *in aeternum*, the self can be subject to fate (or karma) only when it is defiled by the traffic of matter and bracketed by time, i.e., when it falls in physical reality that constitutes only a small part of an infinite and sentient nonphysical cosmos.

Beyond a certain point, the comparison breaks down, which is, perhaps, inevitable that this should happen. In the modern sciences and philosophy, the ephemeral overwhelms the permanent, especially in what we would call "theology of matter" based on deconstructing methods of critical analyses. Such an approach, allegorically speaking, provides a green pasture for the grazing ego raised as the "self-food" for the overconfident critical intellect. The latter is incurably external and prone to self-repeating in its counterintuitive theories. Analyzing endless parameters of the chaos of a personal and general kind, it can be looping within its own arguments like a dog chasing its tail. Thus philosophizing, the local temporal ego likes to criticize the omnipresent self. The most barren muses can prove themselves fertile in criticism aiming at personal interests. The ego might be a god and an atheist in one person; it can create any fantastic plot for its counterfactual novel, in which it would act as both a protagonist and antagonist, and serves as an entire stage and setting.



Entrance © 1992, photo, metal, pencil

A veteran skeptic, the ego does not want to recognize the self (the two have different interests); and yet it is like a bird in a cage struggling towards the open air and the sun. With all its good intentions, the ego cannot know things above its intellectual potentiality, unable to break through its limitation. Each time the idea of the spiritual union is replaced by a next new set of understandings linked to cyberspace or other packets of fresh information, usually there is only a customary theoretical adjustment to the restlessness and flux of our time.

An efficiently thinking individual can make reasonable whatever he wishes and present it as a panacea for the world's misery. The ego, inflated with a kind of theoretic arrogance and aristocratic egotism, is usually both the author and the character in a new intellectual play with a new set of

fragmentations, a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated “inauthentic selves.” That is an old story, the gist of which, in words of Ramana Maharshi, could come to this: “If the idea ‘I am the body’ is accepted, the selves are multiple.”¹⁵ That explains why the modern philosophy is overloaded with the word “fragmentations” of various shades thus making our world and our lives to appear even more fragmented, inconstant, and unpredictable.

In art, most certainly, in the series *Perhappiness*, the mutable state of the psyche is depicted symbolically within the aesthetic field. The archetypal patterns are perceived not as qualities, but as *entities*: they are standing in the presence

White Shadow © 1999



of some impossibility participating in its magic. Exploring the state of *Perhappiness*, natural to the ego's ensnaring cravings, the images are meant to suggest some intuitive way out of its trap. The all-observing Self, the nucleus of the being, contains all aspects of personal and impersonal selves, which in the art might take different forms including doppelgängers, doubles, and various phantoms of the mind. With calmness and fidelity to the general idea, they perform their little miracles remaining in virtually metaphysical rest. For those always looking for beauty, the atmosphere in which these miracles are performed might appear under an almost perceptible aureole of peace. That strange quietude of the mind,

Mandala © 1998



with which all situations are met, is the most typical feature of this series. The subjects in the photographs are not spellbound, as one might think; contrariwise, they are depicted in steady alertness preventing elapsing in the unconscious reactions. Conceptual sobriety helped by magical thinking permeates the general atmosphere. As to the wonderworking principle of that series, it melts away the line between the character, the "vehicle of the soul," and the miracle it performs, so they blend fine-tuned as one. Being torn between the spirit and the attraction to the matter, the soul is in league with both sides, and exercising its relatively free will in the shaky state of *perhappiness*, it tries to decide for one or the other. The general reaction to these little miracles is somewhat predictable: one cannot believe what they suggest and cannot truly admit that they are deceiving.

Our confidence in the oddly cheerful play of illusions lays, most certainly, upon the idea that creativity and mystical states lie on a continuum. That which is given to us to know about it we bring into the world via our artwork that, in a somewhat elliptical way, suggests a set of visual expressions linked to the paradigm of spiritual experience. Focused on that idea, the creative dialog between "I" and its real Self are envisioned in the imagined bodies, pinned to the air like holograms. How each of us can reunite spiritual content with concrete reality depends on a personal imagination; nor should it be forgotten that some people are "hard-wired" differently and get access to the nature secrets more quickly than the others. Building the transformative paradigm, we have to observe certain measures in everything: in images, words, and feelings. Hence, some concepts employ notional methods meaning to explain ideas that otherwise do not make sense, particularly from a biological perspective of a worldly-wise man. Besides, what we convey through art might look differently under the real circumstances, but we are sure that even though each individual experience is unique, it shares primary characteristics with others.

When a searching individual sets his heart upon knowing and longing for transformative experiences, he spontaneously causes them, provoking various incidents often of a mystic kind. Recognizing his own self as both subject and object, the convert begins to cooperate with the transpersonal process, implicating, among other things, the suppression of



Guided Light © 2006

the personal ego to the profit of the spiritual self. It will make the matter more clear if we add that innocence that originates in ignorance comes to knowledge through suffering. But when the convert's faith becomes equal to his knowledge (or vice versa), he definitely will hear the call. There are many ways to respond to it, not only with positive outcomes but also with negative results that arouse fear and suspicion and are highly problematic when lingered upon. So far as getting along in the intermediate state, it is in the nature of any mortal to wait and see; but not too long, because he who waits too long, may die waiting. Maya covers the intellect of even the

learned one who is deliberately delaying or not careful.

Returning from the abstract delineations to the real life, we have to admit that here all symbolism looks prosaic and thoroughly grounded. All our “creaturehood” wants happiness, but before the ability to see it from a spiritual perspective is acquired, it is understood only at a physical level. Emotions “put flesh” on desires, which live performance is staged by the ego that understands the meaning of fulfillment in its selfish way. Even though the identity of the ego can expand to universal proportions, it has a poor ability in responding to spirit and pure beauty. Does that betray impotence of the soul or does the critical point lie elsewhere? Any

Trio © 2001





Ariadne's Thread © 2003

egotist can talk profusely about his soul, x-ray it with unrestrained fancy; a complete alcoholic can speak on that subject, pushing his soul, to use the related metaphor, through the bottleneck of his ego. Even in darkness, in which many deeply troubled persons are groping for an exit that they cannot find, one can bravely exercise the power of human reasoning, generating wacky ideas about the soul. What we are aiming at is rather simple: everyone wants to know oneself in whatever accessible way. Rare, indeed, are those whose souls find proper expression in daily life. There are things superior to our reason, and natural history books do not include a history of the soul.

Many mystics talked about secret communications taking place between them and their souls. The so-called “God’s part in our mind” is more active in certain individuals and, invoking a sense of eternity in them, it guides them across the boundary. That transition will never lose its mystery that would be overly complex for the art-oriented hermeneutics, focused on the condition which can be better imagined than described. Should our language return to the inarticulate state in our minds, it would express the truth more clear, the more so in the eyes of the artists thinking by visual concepts. Artists are not alone in that, considering Emanuel Swedenborg’s observations on heaven: “The speech of angels takes place by means of spiritual and heavenly concepts that to them are forms of words.”¹⁷ We cannot be so sure about the celestial realms, but in the terrestrial circumstances, “the forms of words” require actual words for the better understanding of their meaning. No wonder that the “wordless” artists always like to befriend those who use words skillfully, particularly the poets, for they are genuinely free in their language expressing their “I” and its other selves. In that context, an arch-example of “other I am” would be Walt Whitman declaring in his *Songs of Myself*. “Divine am I inside and out.”

“Darest thou now, O Soul,
Walk out with me towards the Unknown Region,
Where neither ground is for the feet, nor any path to follow?
No map, there, nor guide...”

Has he sought at a distance that which was near? The investigations of the mystics on that account lead to a kind of alterable symbiosis of body and soul, which is hard to deny – everybody is a body with a soul, but only the one who transcended one’s ego is a soul with a body. It is not so easy to dismiss the ego from its “law enforcement” service; besides a *homo naturalis* is not very willing to do it. Periodically, people take a holiday from themselves, from their standards and conventions, but, generally, the erasing of the sense of the ego progresses gradually, relatively unconsciously, and with complications. Whenever a particular element of our character outlives its usefulness, we often chance upon a person who represents this very quality at its worst, suggest-



Fixed Light © 2006

ing to us that we look at ourselves. The shadow appears as a live person crossing our life or materializes in the form of some adverse events in our close surroundings. Then one has to endure the negative encounter while concurrently sorting it out. The pattern is always repeating itself: first, the undesirable feature is spotlighted (otherwise, we are even not aware of its presence), then magnified, and, after reaching its peak expression, is blown up – thus overcome and eliminated. Usually, the negative aspect appears first in its full “glory” before it becomes obsolete and disappears from the environment together with the traces of its shadow in one’s character.

No longer in use, the subtracted quality is nothing but a reminder of man's obsolete battleship with his ego, if the operation is to be successful.

But the ego is a trickster: it switches easily between different blends of mood and, indeed, wants no salvation from itself. With strong narcissistic prolongation into future progress, understood in a thoroughly subjective way, it aspires to lead a prosperous life hoping to have still enough time to get to the promised land. The ego is too self-centered to submit to the methods developed by a long succession of great aspiring minds of the Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. It could be humiliated in its own eyes and still would

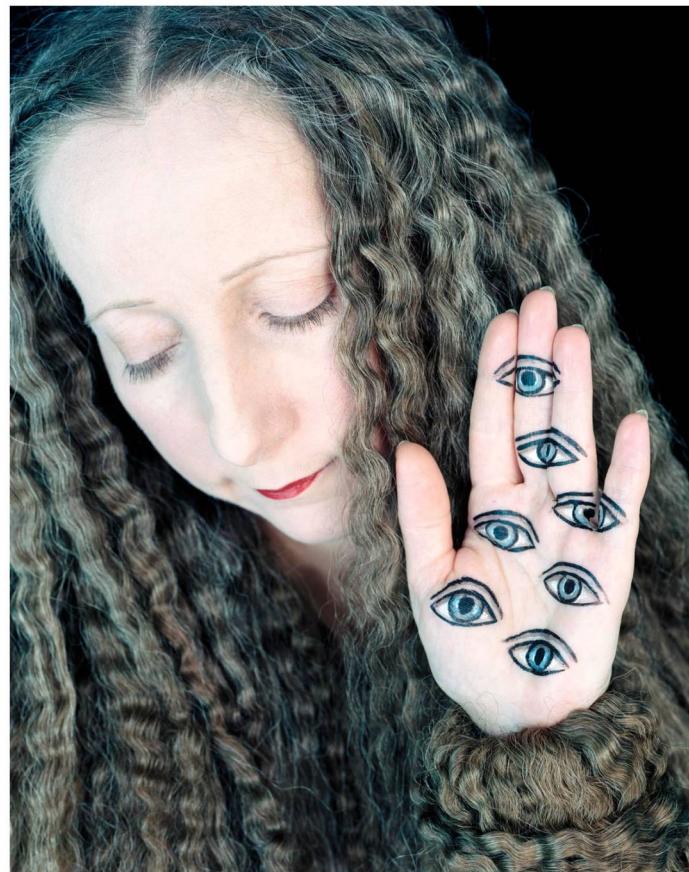
Relations © 1996



resist its cures. With the urge for self-flagellation, it easily comes into collision with the events and, feeling rejected and half dead, it might even want to be finished off allowing itself to sink into unconsciousness. There is a big difference between its mortification done for a spiritual purpose or as a result of a mere degradation. In the latter case, the lifeless ego does not want to be disturbed and, if unexpectedly awakened, it unleashes its rage upon all that prevents its sleep.

In the transitional state, the inner struggle between the spirit and the body, as well as the self and the ego increases. The less the egotistic self-image rules one's life, the closer one gets to the self and, perhaps, it will sound contradictory,

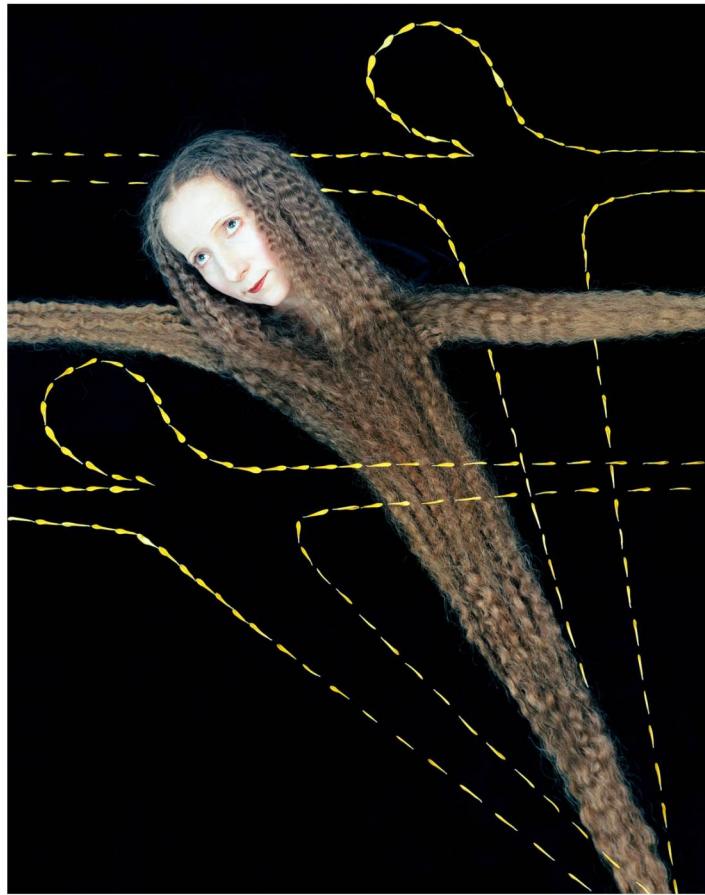
Eyeful © 2002



the more demanding and complicated one's life becomes. Every circumstance of such undesirable experience might seem to be part of a diabolical conspiracy intended to break down one's faith and endurance. Speaking of the promised complications, they are not the end in themselves, but a mere beginning. In a true sense of the logic of Aristotle – the lesser things should be sacrificed for the greater – in the process of self-realization, one enters the so-called "path of denial," a death threat to the world-view of the ego. The taming of a "non-self" needs a strong moral discipline. How fortunate are those able to pull their feelings by the roots and transplant their energy (without the loss) to the spiritual ground, radically different from that of their past. In reality, it rarely happens, for the aspirant has to place on a burning pile all his desires, habits, and thoughts – his entire nature up to that moment – and burn them to ashes. Then, as if filling an empty vessel, he has to fill himself with life altogether different.

That transition is well reflected in the so-called "mystery religions" in the rite of passage, aimed to produce a direct experience of personal transformation. The age-old process of transformation, involving symbolism of death and rebirth, was staged in the initiation rites, characteristic to Christian thinking and its Egyptian and Greek predecessors, particularly the cults of Isis and Osiris and the Eleusinian mysteries. Being a central component of Hellenistic psychology, around the first centuries BC and AD the initiation rites spread all over Europe and the Middle East. In the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, the visions of the end of the world projected their symbolic imagery of transformation onto the cosmos. That picture was further elaborated in the Revelation, now seen with the eyes of perfect faith. At the core of the Christ cult, there is a twofold symbol of death and rebirth, an almost universal representation of the experience of transformation, depicting how the divine in the Son of Man transcends the human in Him.

The religious beliefs are apparently unalike, even though they are alike in a fundamental purpose. Thus, in the Christian and Buddhist traditions, "to deny yourself," that is to deny the ego, is one of the first rules. In the "now" of the psyche, the ego and the self are both present, but the difference between them is as deep as an abyss, and nothing can fill it up or make even. Therefore, crossing over that abyss was



Sunday © 2000

symbolized by death. Colliding with the reality of the world – which present reality is a mass society backed up by the leviathanian mechanisms of profit-oriented technology – each daring soul tries to find the essence in its personal desert. In crossing over the abyss, to repeat the old metaphor, the seeking individual loses his footing, yet never touches the bottom, however deeply he sinks. Feeling dejected, perplexed, and terrified, as if dying, he might seem to have no feet for the journey. Moving out of the ego matrix into something unknown is like passing through nothingness while a duration in a void might result in “ego-death.”

The ego is only an instrument and, like all instruments, it has its imperfections and might outlive its usefulness. No ego does not mean there is no consciousness. Reforming the character of the collective childlike soul that has not yet encountered any alienation, one needs exceptional inner strength to avoid submitting to overwhelming sensory overload and paranoiac reaction. No one can fight against one's own person except from the interior state, meaning that the external must be reformed by the internal, and not the other way around. In that allegoric duo-drama, in which the soul suffers and acts, its "I" is gradually putting on an entirely new personality, little by little exhausting its tellurian karma. Watch yourself with detachment and, as Confucius advises, "Conduct thyself always with the same prudence as though thou went observed by ten eyes and pointed at by ten fingers."¹⁸ The whole process of defending yourself against yourself implies continuous renewal, possibly on a different plane. There are collections of colorful myths about the many ways an ego can break down while undergoing its mystical death, thus reaffirming the eternally identical structure of the transformational process. Deriving a matter-of-fact conclusion from that axiom, Euripides says at the very end of *The Bacchae*, the tragedy introducing the Dionysian Mysteries, "God finds a way that none foresaw."

The description of many patterns of the traumatic transition that belong to the experience of every redeemed man can be condensed to a nebulous but somewhat appropriate trope – the darkening of the mind when one is living as if not living. That mystical state has an intensely dramatic polarity when any good results might entail deplorable side effects and vice versa. Plumbing the depth of the abyss, one is searching, grasping the "darkness" of the unendurable light – for bright light blinds. The very notion of darkness might be interpreted in its exact opposite. Everyone's eyesight is formed to receive the light in which it finds itself. If we illustrate it in a parabolic way, the heavenly light would be like thick darkness for an infernal character; and correspondingly, an angelic creature would see only thick darkness in hell. Following this antithesis, a human being living halfway between these two strata has an equal or halfway vision of light and dark. In the deep mystical darkness, the light can be discerned only by those able to see the invisible. But that might put them in con-

sequent difficulties. "If a man knows more than others he becomes lonely," said C. G. Jung somewhere. The wiser a man is, the harder it is for him to answer the foolish questions



Metal Glove © 2009, photo,
stainless steel, 91.5 x 91.5 x 5 cm

of common people. They, too, are usually disappointed in the wisdom of the answers not attuned to their popular views and, when it comes to it, not matching the general demoralization that chiefly marks the progress of technological civilization today. These observations rest upon no objection to technology (which is an anticipated outcome of the material world) but merely suggest not to be tangled up with it.



Index Finger © 1997

The transitional abyss is not an invention of the mystics. Rendering it in visual art would make it easier to have a sense of the whole initiation process that must remain veiled. In *Perhappiness*, this process is treated allegorically as if in some illuminated manuscript. In circumventing the problems, allegories often suggest a compromise that might be palatable to the unprepared for strange experiences, particularly of a *memento mori* kind. Who can guarantee that while undergoing the mystical death of ego one will not meet one's physical death? An eminently reasonable and limited mind of a frail mortal might not respond to it or, in the case of melancholy optimism, think of spiritual freedom as unachievable,

but even so, something to be sought after and something yet to come. Maintaining an inner distance from the visionary process, we tried to get around some doubts in finding reasons for them. For even though our visual plot undeniably hinges on mysticism, it is, in reality, a sequence of snapshots of the subconscious mind at various stages of its progressive linking to its conscious level.

As artists, we prefer euphemisms and, returning to the notion of the mystical death of ego, might add that *Et in Arcadia ego* is not the sole province of Nicolas Poussin who painted this famous allegory held now in the Louvre. His pastoral scene in the classical Baroque style includes an austere tomb as a symbol of mortality, thoughts of which haunt the young shepherds even in the prime of their idyllic lives. Literally translated as “And I am in Arcadia,” the phrase can have two meanings, depending on the interpretation of who this “I” is. According to popular opinions and

Apparition © 1997



sentiments, it means “And I [death] too in Arcadia” (here we have to keep in mind that Arcadia is the Greek conception of Paradise). In that sense, this phrase is associated with graves, skulls, and other morbid subjects, including inscriptions on the cadaver tombs, exhibiting so-called “likeness lying in repose.” As a motto *Et in Arcadia ego* appeared in many literary works (Goethe, Nietzsche, Andersen, and Evelyn Waugh adopted it as a sobering reminder that we all live with one foot in the tomb). It served for the title of many artworks, old and modern, *exempli gratia*, Guercino’s painting with the macabre skull in the foreground or Beardsley’s Art Nouveau cartoon. That may sound like hyperbole, but in a certain respect, creative imagination is drawn to the theme of death like an insect is drawn to the light.

However, the death in paradise in an alchemical sense has nothing to do with the real cemetery, but symbolizes, so to speak, a “ghostly meeting in the rose garden,” where the prospective adept suddenly encounters his own grave, from which the ghostly body appears as himself. To paraphrase the arcane, that is how the self conquers the ego, allowing itself to be influenced by a secession of mystical events. They might occur rapidly or as a continues flux, and if we are to reduce the description of the novel-like process to its scarcely possible result, the metaphors are indispensable. In art, the distinction between things possible and impossible grows invisible, and it might happen that we shall meet the image of our sincere devotion in person, looking at us from a canvas, photographs, or frozen sculptural form. Classical art might serve us well as a model.

How can the dust of the earth cover someone who is still alive on earth? How can one meet one’s mystical self before being on the other side of the Styx? Plainly, this situation is hard to envisage. Not already in danger of relapsing into the ego-life, the self gradually acquires control, as in the alchemical saying: “Of itself, from, in, and through itself is made and perfected the stone of the wise.”¹⁹ And the order of that transformation does not feel made, but found. Its pivotal turning point seems to be spelled in *Et in Arcadia ego*, which alternative occult meaning is “I conceal the secret of God” (the word “Arcadia” is interpreted as an anagram of *Arca Dei*, Ark of God). That line of alchemical thinking is expressed in Gerhard Dorn’s interpretation, “This truth

'shines' in us, but it is not of us: it is to be sought not in us, but in the image of God which in us."²⁰ This is not different from the Upanishadic view: "He is your Self, the inner con-



Grail © 2001

troller, the immortal. All else is of sorrow."²¹

Placing the alchemical ideas in the psychoanalytical context, we find that in the strange experience approximating death in one's own Arcadia, it is easy to lose the remnants of balance. "The extraction of the soul from the *prima materia* is equivalent to the mortification," says C. G. Jung in *Myste-*

*rrium Coniunctionis.*²² Experimenting in that field, he left his testaments that successfully transferred what he found in himself to the outer world. He admitted that the psychological continuity of that *Mysterium* remained for him unresolved. It may have been so because his ouroboros-like thought process seemed to move in circles, beginning from a longing for an experience of transformation, and culminating in an advantageous escape from the ego, closing the loop with a disadvantageous fall back to the beginning. Even though his attempt of alchemical *coniunctionis* brought some exciting results, they inevitably ended in the torment of returning back to where they started. Perhaps, one more rea-

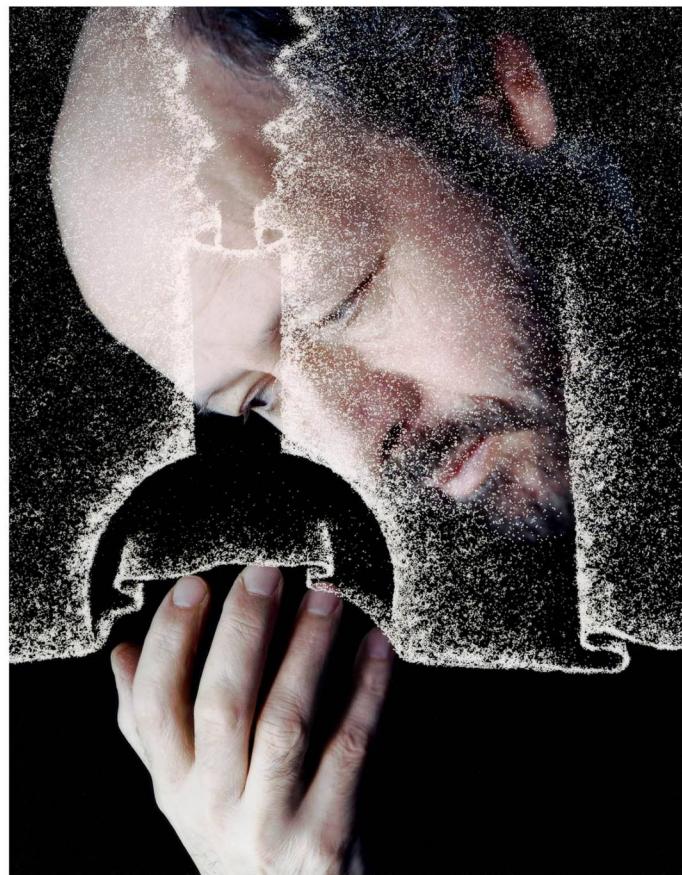
Mini Lab © 2003



son for Jung's disappointment in the results of his alchemical practice is the fact that his experiments were overly interwoven with his peculiar sexual explorations, considered a kind of taboo by society.

As to the alchemical scriptures, their general line in mystic transformation is correct, but the massive amounts of amateurish illustrations with allusive but frequently mindless comments might be very misleading. To rely entirely on their guidance is like to center your life on some fantastic, half-forgotten dreams that one can analyze and overanalyze endlessly. Many of those anonymous dream-like opuses were compiled by individuals with the strong alchemical ego ob-

Flask © 2001



sessed with bizarre ideas.

Since we deal with the subject of creativity, and many creative people have plenty of peculiarities, analyzing them might shake their confidence in their personal uniqueness, artwork, and everything else they see under the sun. Cultivation of obsessive thinking about oneself might result not in rectification of psychological aberrations but rather in the prolonging of a neurotic experience. Feeding on the addiction to the intimate emotional dependence on their guru-analyst, people become even more self-centered around their neurotic egos. Hermann Hesse, himself analyzed by Jung, openly stated in his letter to him later, “A psychoanalysis is such a difficult and dangerous experience for artists. Those who take it seriously might easily have to refrain from all artistic activity for the rest of their lives... In our own sphere, we artists practice a genuine form of *sublimatio*, not out of assertiveness and ambition, but in a purely graceful way. I do not mean the type of artist that the people and the dilettante have in mind, but rather the artist as a servant; Don Quixote, a knight even in all his madness, is also a victim.”²³ Ill-fitting to artistic creativity, the diagnostic labels would be the roughest, if not misleading, guides in the spiritual search. With all due respect to Jung and his work that undoubtedly has some spiritual residue, we cannot disregard that his aim was quite different from those testimonies of the old creeds, which he employed for his analyses. “Unlike gnostic texts, however, Jungian psychology does not see salvation as a separation of that divine fragment from the mundane, and its removal to the divine. Rather, Jung takes the entire dualist myth and locates it within the psyche.”²⁴ One of Jung’s achievements was that he successfully planted the idea of the unconscious in the collective consciousness of modern psychotherapy. But regarding spiritual development, pure, whole, and not mixed with sickness, Jung can’t be counted among “the earth’s anointed,” who in having nothing, had the whole world.

The heightened interest in personal status and wealth might induce the metamorphosis, but not of the desirable kind. At the final moment of your life, you may bring only that which you have given away, possessing only what you have renounced, in the sense of not being attached to it. In so far as we become empty, the highest principle operates



Golden Mean © 1995, cut out of photo, metal

through us. The self is the window through which the eternity looks upon this life, but if the impetus of one's life is too competitive, motivated by the desire of making one's enterprise to prosper in power, wealth, and influence, that window might open into a wrong garden. This metaphor is particular-

ly accurate if a “window-opener” happens to be trapped in the net of sexual experiments and certain megalomaniac concepts. Then in spite of all his intellectual and spiritual wealth, each of his mental ventures that reach spiritual progress might bring him back to the same point from which he began. Should the gravitational forces of matter be excessive in the soul, it will be pooled back to matter, and neither great intellect nor alchemical imagination will be able to resist it. Remaining at best a half-egotist or at worst acquiring superhuman power in his superiority, in the psychological field, he will be successful only in defending himself against himself, and merely for the sake of his ego. The world usually does not mistreat such individuals; but as the apocryphal saying goes, “Let him who has grown rich be king, and let him who possesses power renounce it.”²⁵

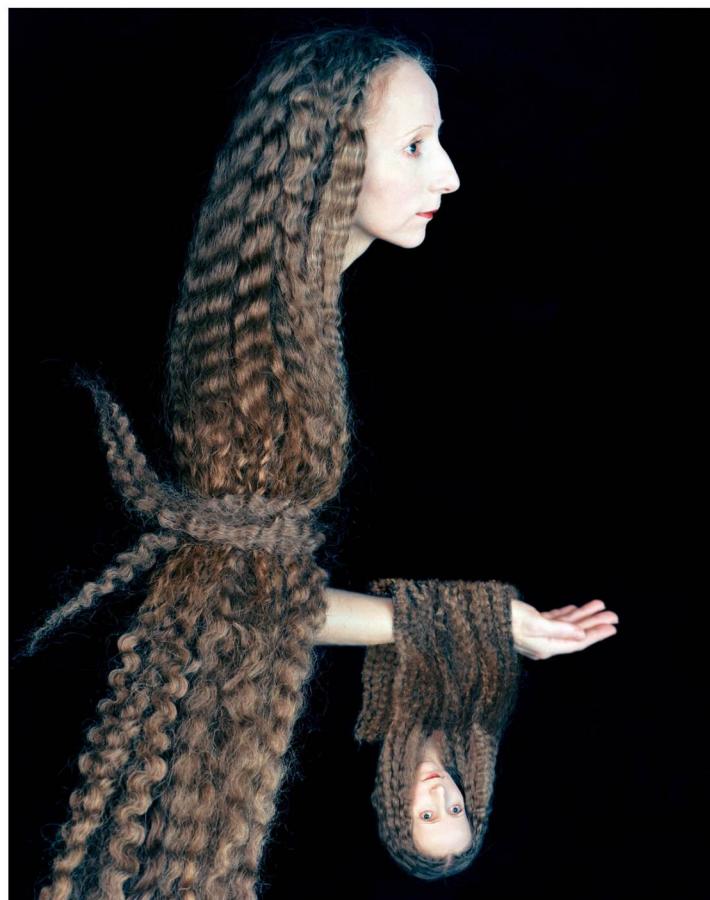
That returns us to the topic about the law of sacrifice that, generally, presupposes resignation. The person whose mind operates at the level of the higher consciousness assimilates the idea of sacrifice mentally, while those operating at the lower consciousness must endure it physically, not always able to comprehend it. The materialistic unregenerate man and the blind unconditional egotist with particular talents, both remain unaware of that process. It never occurs to them that occasionally they also experience its preliminary pressure, mainly in the moments when they are unreservedly frank and able to content themselves with come-what-may.

We do not want to go as far as proposing after Aristotle that man is a civil animal, but we still cannot deny that it would be virtually impossible to activate the process of regeneration in men who spend too many years living unconsciously, determined by order of mere matter, conventions, and his unthinking habits. Not *per accident*, people face their destiny by which they discover their alienation from the self and are forced to sacrifice a civil animal within their individuality. As it is said, everybody gives something, but only somebody gives everything. However disproportional this statement may sound, it is in no way rhetorical, but is merely a matter of common sense: the spiritual assets rise pro rata with the decrease of the attachments to material assets. The casual New Age joke might illustrate the different degrees of sacrifice of animal nature in man without too much seriousness: when the chicken invited the pig to the diner “Ham and

Egg" the pig bluntly refused, saying: "From you, they want only a contribution, but from me – the total surrender."

People offer sacrifices for their gods, for their ego, and for many other personal purposes. There are also some who offer sacrifice for the sake of the sacrifice itself. The supreme sacrifice means death on all levels of consciousness, not excluding physical death. For all that nature gives us, we give something of ours, be it on a physical, psychological, or spiritual plane – the more valuable a thing, the higher the price is to pay. In the process of perfection through sacrifice, one passes from the unregenerate animal-like state to the *homo*

Napkin © 1998



mentalis. Then, replaying the same method of perfecting, but in the higher degree, an intelligent individual can become an embodiment of the archetype. In response to his psychobiological change, the newly acquired archetypal power enables him, speaking hermetically, to cross the last abyss to the higher self. In a creative parallel, an archetype is a genius; and picturing him in connection with the topic of sacrifice, we can go along with the familiar precept, "suffering is a condition of genius." The fair impression of that is given in the apocrypha *The Acts of John*,¹⁶ which introduces ecstatic metaphysical experience by contradiction:

"You hear that I suffered,
yet I suffered not;
and that I suffered not,
yet I did suffer...
In a word, that what they say of me,
I did not endure,
But what they do not say,
those things I did suffer."

In the Upanishadic tradition, the meditation on the sacrifice, its perception, and comprehension was considered more important than the actual sacrifice. From here, it is not a great distance to the Gnostic mythical sacrifice of Christ. Such an imaginary state can, therefore, represent an initiatory test, and those who meet it may feel as earthquake survivors: bewildered, bedazzled, and transfigured.

You cannot destroy the ego by fasting or penitence and repentance: they can share the ego's adaptive functions to their utmost. Yet, do not look at it as an enemy, for hate only tightens the bonds with the object of hatred. How is one to honor and prosecute the ego at the same time while gradually separating oneself noncompulsory from its influence with calmness, indifference, and forgiveness? The interior impulse provides the will, the exterior the deed, which is theoretically correct, but if one is to separate facts from wishful thinking, it becomes clear that when life goes by in its natural speed, it does not bring substantial changes. Crippled by common sense, the ego can just wither in senescence and soon will be of no use unless in time its energy is kindled by something unexpected. Then again, one is taught

and enlightened by the situations that help continue the battle with the self-ruling ego. At the proficient stage, the situation is changed by some radical turn in life, which one might find disconcerting, hard, more than hard, much too hard to understand and accept. A single event can bend your life as if all your roots are pulled out, and courage does not seem to be your strong suit at that moment. If the emotional approach is replaced by faith and faith is fortified by knowledge, then the radical process might succeed. And what is the radical sign of this process? To apply mathematical nomenclature for a metaphor, is it a square root extracted from an otherwise too conventional life?

Homo © 1992, photo, metal



Technically speaking, in uniting the “upward” tendency in us with the “downward” propensity that are drawn to each other as true opposites, one learns the *lex aeterna* synonymous with reality and learns it through one’s personal experience. Both the “upper” and “lower” elements, to give them a status of their own, seem to play in us a Christ-like drama, each in its own way and at its own plane – something valuable given up as a sacrifice to both sides, consciously and unconsciously. They orchestrate the ego’s exit from the scene. Here, we must repeat that the mythology of dying and rising gods is very rich, presenting many forms of suffering: numinous, mental, emotional, and physical; they might be

Pedestal © 1997



god-inflicted, hellishly inferior, and everything else in-between. Theologically, it might be set out in the following line: "Devil would destroy God if only he could." Developing this thought further, the alchemical *Musaeum Hermeticum* says: "It is the great honor of faithful souls that from their very birth an angel is appointed to preserve and keep each of them."²⁷ This promising inscription encircles the philosopher's child (or an aspiring alchemist) pictured in the center of the universal egg called *Mundus Elementaris*.

In the annals of the history of art, there are many artworks depicting sacrifice, the most known of them are filled with wonderment and silent aspiration. The expression

Organic Cube © 1998



of the ecstatic sacrificial introspection raises a sense of isolation and solitude, marvel and awe before the numinous experience evoking an acute understanding of personal insignificance in the face of something great. The concept of numinous wove itself into our art, running like a thread through all our photographs. It is not a by-product of free imagination or intellectual subtlety encompassed by the logic of mind but represents a natural state of the general being of everything, including our life and our way of living. As to our way of expression – not always being serious about being serious – it may provide no transcendental value for theologians but can cause people to think about the abstract and the mystic. In the vague “religion of art,” the power of words is presented visually and remains among fantasy, mysticism, or humor, with unbelievable absurdities that do not enter into the calculation of factual truth. Nobody would blame Dante or Fra Angelico for creating the heaven to soar into or Bosch for the hell to be dragged down into. Creating reality out of the world of visionary experience, our images seem to be externally passive but imply the state of most intensive inner activity, fostering liberation of the better capacity and the ability of a man. Coming into collision with the events felt like waves carrying a ferryboat (the one driven by Charon across the abhorred Styx), the ego in its most basic faculty fears death and wants it without wanting it.

In surrendering self-will to the Great Will, reason gives itself up to suffering, yet while acting in harmony with the so-called Great Happening, it gradually enters the painless state. The final state, after the abyss is crossed, is beyond suffering and beyond description. We can only suppose that it would be a state of peace and harmony such as one had never known. The self-realized person would be as exalted as he is humble; he would never fall in a nebulous state of a proselyte who can let his identity be swallowed in the vast energy of something inexplicable or to be appropriated by the centripetal force of some guru. In the exalted state of mind, one does not need a spiritual teacher – the two become equal.

The internal man is not reformed solely by knowing, understanding, and being wise. Too much knowledge may hinder the process, one must go deeper than thinking. Emmanuel Kant admitted in his letter, “I do not even understand myself sufficiently... for the principles of thinking do



Mooring © 2003, photo, metal

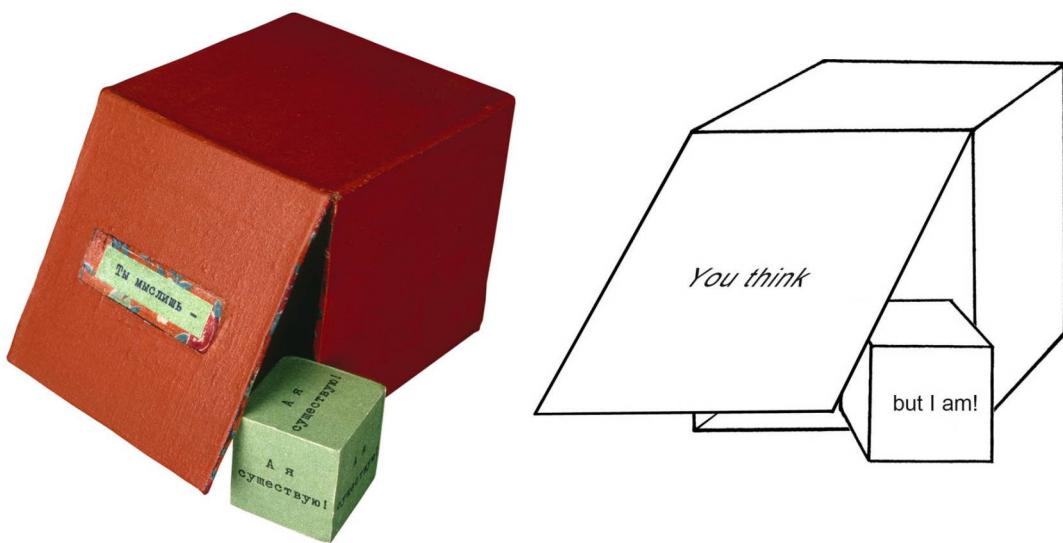
not come first (as they should), but instead follow after.” He “wanted to know more of himself than he does and was afraid to.”²⁸ The self is not realizable by analytical study only, with which it can’t be content, remaining an enigma to itself. On this theme, the mind can reason only to a point because when it comes to an impassible wall, all that remains would be to appeal to the higher intuition. To that might be added, rather unenthusiastically, that the devoted search for self-knowledge often assumes the form of sacrifice and suffering.

Exposed to the philosophical thoughts of the Occident

or Orient, throughout the world, one will find the same requirements, better known as the Delphic injunction “Man, know thyself!” That “know yourself,” *gnothi seauton* (Gr.) or *nosce te ipsum* (Lat.), etymologically originates from Sanskrit, as in *Jnana* yoga, meaning the practice of the analytical kind of yoga that can lead to *knowledge* of the absolute through clear understanding. As Sri Shankaracharya taught, “Knowing the real Self, which is the witness of the intellect and its actions, by this thought, ‘I am That,’ conquer the false idea of ‘I am’ in the non-self. First, give up following the world, then following the body, and then following the scriptures, and, in that way, do away with your ignorance of identifying the Self with the non-self.”²⁹ Subconscious links to the Self, which is never born and never lost, are always available, while the conscious connections are somewhat questionable and therefore something in us never stops inquiring.

The traditional methods of self-investigation were intended to tie an individual mind with the Great Mind. Those knowing this practice from books, not life and experience, can never comprehend it. More than once, we gave our-

R. G., *You Think but I am* ©
1974, cardboard, fabric,
paper, wood, 8 x 8 x 8 cm



selves unanswerable questions, thinking of the way of reintegration with the archetypal that pushes men along the path while attracting them to their source. One such questions was visualized in our *Photoglyphs* as “Am I me?” Taking oneself as a starting point, each thinking individual might ask himself:

Is that me what I feel to be me?



Am I Me? © 1991

Am I myself and not somebody else?
What is my soul, my mind, my thought, my God?
From where does all of me and my come from?
What should I know of, and with what?
Why are we here?
How could the knower be known?
When I was gone, what would become of me?
Is that me what I feel to be me?



To Be © 1989

Do I have a chance to find in me the existential source of all?
Where should I turn to?
If the self can know God without the world, why then I was
placed in it?

One can easily extend the questionnaire since self-inquiry was always known as one of the ways of investigating the cause of the mystery of *radix ipsius* (the root of itself) or the latent inner basis transcending all individual differences. In this way, one is put in the position to observe the part of one's soul that is facing the absolute (the Godhead, the Atman, or the spirit, depending on what tradition we cite). As the mystics believe and the devotional Hindus are ever chanting, "I am He," self-knowledge is knowledge of God. Comprehending it at the meta-level, one needs not look back on the "age of faith" with nostalgia. The possibility always exists every minute of every day because we are inside that

spiritual reality like fishes in the sea. This metaphor seems to convey a “palpable” sense of what it’s like to live in that state.

The innermost part of the being always remains free and cannot be caught in the net of thoughts, even less in the net of the events – the matter cannot encroach upon the territory of the spirit. The self was compared to a torch of fire from the flame of God, the Soul of All that imperceptibly resides in our souls even when they sunk into our bodies. In our para-



R. G., *Self*, 1988, wood, acrylic, 35 x 35 x 5 cm. The central circle with “self” can be rotated, thus making “myself,” “himself,” “herself,” “yourself.”

phrasing: the natural part of the self is here while the supra-natural is always there. The self is an archetype within the absolute that, in Meister Eckhart's view, is ever in the oneness of divine essence: “There is something in the soul so closely akin to God that it is already one with Him and needs never be united to Him.”³⁰ The daring position of the mystic and especially the point that the soul “needs never be united” might be arbitrary, for, even if the true essence of the self is entirely spiritual, what do we know of it for sure?

Many mystics labored with inquiring, enduring distress in their minds and bodies and wearing themselves down in

seeking. The universal experience of the self is projected in multiple ways: into religion, mythology, literature, art, and life. Each one has its own tale of how to follow the ego down the rabbit hole into the frightening darkness, where it undergoes a complete change, voluntarily suffering while simultaneously conquering all pain. As far as “getting on” with the methodized technique, it is well known that emptying the mind in meditations can provoke the sense of vacuity of such dimension as to make one watch how one’s local self is gradually dissolving in an omnidirectional expansion.

In the kinetic concept *Self* (p. 135), the middle circle with the word “self” can be rotated, thus extending into: “myself,” “himself,” “herself,” and “yourself.” This mutable three-dimensional formula poetically demonstrates how through the method of individualization, one can conversely achieve de-individualization. Self-knowledge, according to Nietzsche, transforms our life into a work of art, which can work the other way around, should the artwork be transformed into a life experience. When an individual reaches a state of self-consciousness dissolving his ego, the latter produces the opposite effect by filtering “I” through the others. Such point of self-reference contains all other points within its “non-locality.” As if by treachery, it forces one to recognize oneself via the others with increased intensity. Preserving individuality, the self becomes a continuation of the world – in each “me,” there is something that is not exhausted by “me” alone, something not entirely “myself.” Wrapped in a paradox, that individual “self-expanding universe” includes all possible universes, similar to a holographic part by which the whole is restored. In Buddhist thought, that theme is developed slightly differently: individuality is disappearing together with the belief in individuality.

To avoiding an “overdose” of God or turning these thoughts into metaphysic poetry, we want to present this subject in a more aesthetic and less edifying aspect. Not bent on conventional means of nature imitating art, our images are meant to suggest certain possibilities of understanding without the additional aid of words. In the climate of contemporary art, the human imagination might be unpredictable; yet the anatomy of the creative psyche essentially alters not, regardless of its metamorphic changes in the ongoing world. Even though our fictional vocabulary has some affiliation

with the notion of “traditional culture,” it remains somewhat unconventional, if not strange. Following the rules of the genres rooted in the mythic consciousness, which is not less alive now and here as it was alive in remote times and places, we internalize the values of the aesthetic way of searching, perhaps not without mystical significance and paradoxes, yet light and gay and full of expectations. Our salvation is essentially from ourselves, and understanding that might catalyze a desire for personal metamorphosis. In the result of correct self-perception, the latent inner self can transcend all individual differences unlocking personality at the neurological level. The comprehension of your own essential nature might bring fulfillment and, as some say, bliss. One can feel like the phoenix that immolates itself and after each sacrifice appears alive in a new light.

Globe © 1996, photos, metal



3: OUROBOROS

Comprehension of your own nature or coming to the self is impossible without breaking the circle of the *prima materia*, the circle of the latent inner and outer content rotated around the ego-axis by the four winds of the world. First, we'll talk about the circle, then about the cross of the four winds.

The self-devouring serpent is an old sign of self-fecundating and self-sufficient nature in the eternal circle of renewal. The ouroboros or snake eating its tail (that's what "ouroboros" means in Greek) is also a circle, perhaps in some

Ouroboros © 1994/2009,
photos, stainless steel con-
struction, diameter 115 cm



devious sense. Even visually, this word might be stretched like a “roundel locomotive” rolling on its four “o’s.”

•ur•ob•or•s

The Gnostics had equated this symbol with an old cosmic serpent that keeps the ring of undifferentiated totality, the continuous principle of basic life. “My end is my beginning,” says the inscription on some of their old drawings, vividly tracing its self-generating and self-sustaining principle. Feeding on its tail, this non-ending force eternally prolongs the daydream of matter that is, in fact, life itself, with all its bad and good connotations. The ouroboros is also the symbol of logical paradox: as a modem of nature that always survives its own burial, it is both the apocalypse and the creation at the same time.



R. G., *Ouroboros*, 1986,
shifting head, wood,
acrylic, 25.5 x 34 x 7.6 cm

In retrospect, we can say that Rimma’s wooden shifting object furnished the first precedent of this figure in our art. The head of the sculptural *Ouroboros* is mounted on its rounded trunk as if a muff or a sleeve sliding around its never-ending tail. The conjunction of the beginning and the end has no precise location. The head is an eternal mental factor slipping around its infinite body. The relief seems to give an

“off the wall” proof for an equally bizarre statement: the ouroboros’ end is endless. This was our first artistic attempt to smooth over the differences between the concepts of metaphysical subject and object, presenting them as one unit: the two are merely opposite ends of the same rope.

To give a clue to the idea of opposites, we have to look at this circle as a hermaphroditic amalgam of male-female energies. For that, let us imagine the basic forces of yang and yin not as a circle but as two serpents or two fishes making together a loop. Suggesting rather than depicting it, the diptych *Two Fishes* makes the astrological circle of the Pisces, the last sign of the zodiac. According to the widespread but mostly unsubstantiated tales of the Pisces’ marvels, one can gather that this sign hides way out from the ring of the ouroboros-like zodiac that is supposedly keeping men in a state of spiritual obscurity. In various alchemical drawings, similar dual forces are depicted as two black and white birds in murderous copulation, or two lions, the winged and the wingless, or two dragons holding in their mouths each other’s tails. Similar to the Piscean version, they present the reptilian, feathery, and feline alternatives to the marriage of the opposites. United in a duplex ouroboros, they are continually chasing each other and feeding on each other, thus nourishing and impregnating themselves in a rather bizarre way.

Aside from these allegories, it is worth pointing out that nature always turns towards itself and transforms all its substances. In feeding back on its end and waste, nature continually creates frictions in life, resolving them only for the purpose of a new similar creation. The conflict of duality resolves itself through a temporal union of the opposites soon to be dissolved again. That is how the ouroboros, the wheel of anxiety, proceeds further and further into itself. Its trunk is often drawn partly white and partly black, showing the equal sides of reintegrating day and disintegrating night, similar to the Tao sign-circle of yang and yin. The alchemical version of it was called Serpent of Mercury, the species from the exotic zoo of animal omnipotence, which characteristic feature is, in self-definition, “one beyond both.” The Roman god whose name is also used for the silvery metallic liquid in our thermometers, androgynous Mercury (called “Hermes” by the Greeks) carries the Caduceus as his symbol which two

entwined snakes symbolize the healing and the poisonous substances of the world. It should be recalled that, as a chemical property, mercury is a fluid metal while metaphorically it unites the soft and adaptable feminine nature with the strong masculine metal substance.



Two Fishes © 1994,
photos, metal

All life can be associated with the ouroboros creating and devouring itself incessantly, therefore, its digestive process must be understood ontologically. In hermetic lore, its primordial matrix is coordinated with cosmogony. In endless repetition, prime chaos exhibits order and returns to its initial state; ripening in the fertility and shrinking in the sterility while everything is in passing. The dark matrix of

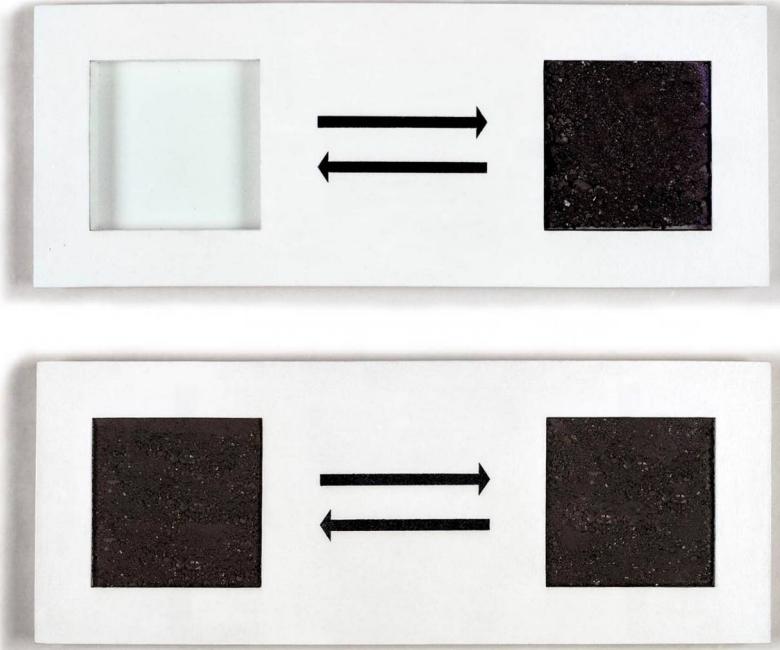
matter is



and always in flux. There is no bottom to its “pit.” Viewed from that perspective, the ouroboros is oppressively contracting, as a densely dark stone cave where earth sucks slowly and composedly at the feet, where all is dreamlike and gloomy. This primordial instinctual force controls seemingly uncontrollable chaotic powers of the undifferentiated. In its virginal state of *masa confusa* or *prima materia*, the sustaining natural force of all living was equated to an existence in a prenatal condition in the early cosmogony. It is the same sentiment expressed in the myth of the creation of the world in Plato’s *Timaeus* (33): “It had no need of eyes, for there was nothing outside it to be seen, nor of ears, for there was nothing outside to be heard. There was no surrounding air to be breathed, nor was it in need of any organ by which to supply itself with food or to get rid of it when digested. Nothing went out from or came into it anywhere, for there was nothing. Of design it was made thus, its own waste providing its own food, acting and being acted upon entirely with and by itself, because its designer considered that a being which was sufficient unto itself would be far more excellent than one which depended upon anything.”

Ouroboros ingests the world while creating it; but approaching it only from its digestive aspect would be equal to imprisonment in the raw, instinctual unconsciousness, even if one is able to find an intellectual justification for its doomsday. That is if all life would be reduced to extremity while in general humanity lives within the time-binding ouroboros relatively well, making it as comfortable as circumstances and its internal darkness allow. Moreover, obscurity seems to suit our civilization, judging by the evangelical words, “the Light has come into the world, but men loved the darkness more than they loved the Light.” (John 3:19)

As a psychophysical symbol, the ouroboros belongs to the background of creation, inclusive of the higher and lower forces of existence. It encircles the mineral, bestial, human, and the superhuman planes, all superimposed on each other.



V.G., *Emptiness – Earth* and
Earth – Earth, 1975, soil,
mazonite, glass, enamel, each
work 25 x 65 x 4 cm

Few examples from mythology may suffice to establish how these things correspond. In the Babylonian creation myth, the physical life originates from the body of the primordial serpent Tiamat, which is the dark devouring chaos of matter. It would not be difficult to trace the origin of this metaphor in the natural world, for the snakes live in crevices in the ground, so to speak, in the Earth's intestines. The chthonic depths are also endowed with psychological symbolism, for they harbor the underworld of the unconscious supporting all convolutions of nature and accumulate all repressed memories. In allowing certain validity for the symbol of the ouroboros in the external world, a sensible mind may reluctantly agree that it plays the dynamic role of the catalyst steering up the motion of the contrasting negative and positive forces operating in the confused multiplicity of the world. To give that idea a mystical turn, we would add that

the ouroboros device triggers the descent of spirit in matter and does the rest, that is, triggering it back again. Regarding its positive aspects, they are also duly reflected in mythology. The Indian god Vishnu, the preserver of life, serenely slumbers on the coils of Ananta, the wise serpent without an end. Indra kisses the venomous snake and upon swallowing its poison transforms it into *Soma*, the Vedic ritual drink that gives immortality. The life force of kundalini is also envisioned as a coiled serpent that sleeps with its tail in its mouth at the base of the *Muladhara* chakra. When it awakens, it rises and moves up, activating all other chakras.

Braided Arms © 1994,
photo, metal, pencil



The maternal ouroboros feeds the embryonic egos: some of them become stronger with this nourishing, while the others who are eaten, respectively become weaker. With some exaggeration, we can interpret its mouth-tail junction in two ways: as a vaginal mouth swallowing a phallic tail and, applying this proposition in reverse, which is also valid, as a mental solar (male) head devouring a sensual moon (female) tail. Aside from the gender, the mouth-tail junction represents conscious/unconscious interaction, depending what dominates, what and in what direction the ouroboros rotates in your eyes. When circulating in the astrological direction, the head seems to regurgitate its tail; while turning clockwise, it buries its tail into its head. No matter what happens, the end is not the end.



In Hinduism, the duality of solely conscious and solely unconscious principles was personified by two demons that wanted to pass for gods to receive *Soma*, the drink of immortality. These were Rahu, the head without a body, and Ketu, the body without a head. In astrology, they signify the two nodes of the Moon called *caput draconis* and *cauda draconis* (respectively, head and tail of a dragon). Here again, we come to the sublunar zone with its phallic father, the principle of a head, and the entangling mother with the multitude of snaky tails, respectively, mythological dragons and gorgons. In the classical tradition, they were concretized in the images of Typhon (Son of Gaia or Mother Earth) and his several female counterparts, such as Python, created by Hera and defeated by Apollo, decapitated by Perseus Medusa, one of the three sisters Gorgons, and the many-headed Hydra slain by Heracles. The draconic head force of Typhon represents mental and physical aggression, anger and intellectual pride. His female associates prefer psychological weapons in their wicked undertaking: Gorgon's snakes for hair induce psychosis that invades from inside – she turns those who look at her into stone. There are many more of their reptilian relatives; it is enough to cast your glance on any folklore tradition around

the world. You could say that mythology swarms with snakes, big and small, from giant anacondas to little asps while in the smallest scale, the treacherous serpent is also a worm, a worm ouroboros.

The alchemical saying, “Take the head, but beware of the tail,” points out this symbolic entanglement in the dualism of “one” and the “other.” In psychoanalytic terminology, it would mean a prerogative of unconscious over conscious and vice versa; both can lead to a split personality. C. G. Jung affirmed that the ouroboros or *serpent mercurialis* “is its own father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister... It begets and sacrifices itself and is its own instrument of sacrifice, for it is a symbol of the deadly and life-giving matter. One of its symbols is the scorpion, which stings itself to death.”³¹ Having been himself entangled in this psychiatric tail-devouring saga, Jung admitted in his memoirs, written just before his death, that he consciously submitted himself to the impulses of the unconscious. His preoccupation with murky, ambivalent experiences of his patients and bizarre second-rate alchemical fantasies often seemed to lead deeper and deeper into the unconscious (but not out of it), in addition to the effect of over-analysis. The non-stop activity of the mind around the same point might be not less dangerous than a flat ignorance capable of paralyzing the growth of the psyche. Here lies the old dilemma of too much vs. too little.

In hermetic lore, the ouroboros is androgynous and self-eating. This ongoing activity simply complies with the fixed regulations of life that in its rudimental physicality can be reduced to a digestive process. Our dimension is ruled by the law of predation, very much in an ouroboric way. In the *Papyrus of Ani*, we read that when Egyptian god Afu Ra reaches the utmost limit of darkness, arriving at the twelfth section of the underworld (compare to Pieces, the twelfth sign of the zodiac or its twelfth house), his boat “enters the serpent at the tail, and drawing the god through the body of the serpent, brings him out at its mouth. During his passage through the serpent, Afu Ra is transformed into Khepera, a newly-born god of the day who can destroy every enemy.”³² Even our intestines look like a serpent twisted in convolution. In the survival of the fittest, one species preys upon the other for the sake remaining alive. As a collective image of all life, ouroboros has no one to eat but itself. Well aware of that prin-

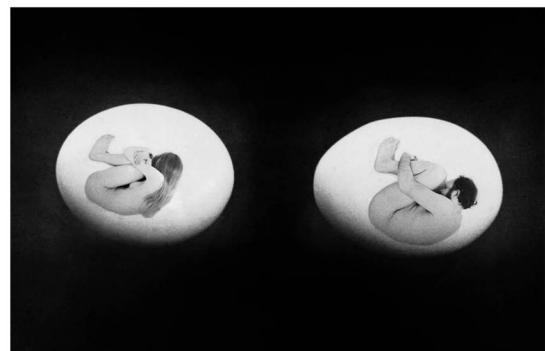
ciple, the yogis, hermits, and other solitary people always understood it on the objective and subjective levels: in their ascetic self-limitation, metaphysically speaking, they also have nobody to digest but themselves. That is when one turns one's own poison inward and gets oneself cured of it. In various mystery cults, that principle was expressed in symbolic cannibalism, which was later reflected in Christianity in the Eucharist, a ceremony during which consecrated bread and wine, symbolizing the flesh and blood of the Savior, are eaten and drunk.

Unconsciously, we touched on that theme in our early

Inspiraled © 1993, photos, metal



performance *The Eggs*, in which the egg-shelled psyche, alchemically divided into M and F, is disassembled into its components through self-mortification and self-sacrifice and reassembled back through self-consuming – the Supper at Last. As a metaphor veiled in many meanings, self-eating represents a redemptive part of the performance. In the ecclesiastical interpretation, particularly in St. John Chrysostom's,



The Eggs, 1977. Performance in three stages: *ab ovo* or the embryos are within the eggs, the eggs are fried and then eaten as a self-sacrificial meal. Photo Victor Novatsky.

self-sacrifice was enacted with Jesus eating his flesh and drinking his blood at the Last Supper. Those who believe retell it with wonder; those who do not, pay it no mind or consider it fiction, but that doesn't always mean what it should, for certain ideas survive somewhere in the subconscious. At the end of the nineteenth century, the allegory of "self-eating" interpreted *de facto* provoked rather strange debates. Not capable of making a distinction between the metaphor for the idea and the idea itself, several psychiatrists tried to ascribe paranoid mental disturbances to Christ; naturally, that medical conclusion evoked the protests of theologians. Thus, Dr. Albert Schweitzer wrote his thesis for the medical doctorate trying to prove Christ's mental health. Those half-forgotten debates illustrate how the human mind can collide with the bars of its limitations if operating at the gross level, calculatedly or even in its best intention as in the case of Dr. Schweitzer. In the ancient mystery traditions, the true meaning of the deities was hidden and kept apart from common interpretation, in which everybody could indulge at the level of mythology according to each one's capability of understanding. Besides, there always will be a distinction between the teachings of Jesus or the Buddha and teaching about them.

In the process of individualization, not for the sake of the ego but rather for its transcendence, the rotation of the ouroboros in its tail chasing game continues "until the earth becomes heavenly and heaven becomes earthly." Perhaps that is how man can consume, in a spiritual sense, of course, his passions and other weaknesses, and after digesting them, finally get rid of them. It means that his many negative tendencies, fears, hatred, desires, pride, and so on are not pacified or sedated, but eliminated as such. This is not a renewal of the skin of the old snake that feeds on its own body, but a radical departure from the sublunary impulse of periodical alternations in form, but not in essence. As always, the mythology reflects that victory parabolically. At the foundation of the Hindu temples, it was a custom to drive a stake through a serpent's head in imitation of the victory of god Indra over the serpent of chaos. The Delphian temple is said to have been built where solar god Apollo had slain the python of darkness. Delphic prophetesses ("Delphi" means "womb" in Greek) were called Pythias after the slain python;

even the name of Pythagoras, one of the greatest minds of the antiquity, came from the same root.

The blind fortune of the perpetual ouroboros operates similarly to the wheel of samsara or the cycle of becoming in the Tibetan Buddhism. In the center of this wheel, Tibetan mandalas depict three animals: a pig, a snake, and a cock, each representing a particular poisonous delusion. Following each other in a circle, they bite each other's tails, thus arranging a vital ring of the collective form of the ouroboros. As we already have talked about the allegories of the human *bestiarium* (book 1: *Be-lie-ve*, ch. 7 *Anima-l*), there is no need to repeat the explanation of the symbolism of the piggish and

Naga © 1998



cocky nature in the human psyche. By their very essence, they embody the ignorance binding men to the world of sensual illusions. The bestial circle of Samsara is characteristic with the particular instinctive alloys of greed and endless desires (a pig), passion and pride with folly (a cock), and malice and anger with hatred (a snake), while together they form a cohesive bond. In the East, they see this wheel of samsara as a round of reincarnations within the belly of the “monster of matter” usually pictured as a kind of hybrid between a tiger and a snake.

The thought of the life inside somebody’s stomach immediately triggers the image of biblical Jonah, who was stuck in

Three Figures © 1999



the belly of the big fish. In the cosmology of the Gnostic sect *Ophites*, which name derives from the Greek word “snake,” the ouroboros was seen as an equivalent to Leviathan, the sea-monster that holds the boundary of creation and “shuts it off from the divine world of love and light.” The Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia* (22) says, “The outer darkness is a great dragon, whose tail is in his mouth, outside the whole world and surrounding the whole world.” That enclosure is not very different from the wheel of samsara.

The concept of the ouroboros might demonstrate mythological, philosophical, intellectual, and even ironical acuity. Bearing in mind that nothing exists which is not connected, we rendered the ironic content of the ouroboros freely, in a rather chimerical body of *A Horse in the Shape of a Snake*. Two variants of this “horse,” the short and the long, both look like narrow black stockings filled with different objects. Each section of this soft palpable “horse” has a label suggesting an absurd content that spectators may probe for themselves. At exhibitions, we hang this work in the air, suspending several yards of that so-called *A Horse in the Shape of a Snake* on strings from the ceiling.

A Horse in the Shape of a Snake, 1977, fabric,
various little objects sown inside, 190 x 4 cm,
collection of Jean Brown, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles





The drawing of the content of
A Horse in the Shape of a Snake

We made that reptilian thing on impulse as a joke and did not give it another thought. But we do now. The deceptive content of its cold-blooded body might intrigue with its abstract concreteness carried to absurdity. The small compartments with various small objects sewn inside have rather strange tags – all kinds of “inexplicables” would be the best word to describe them. How much this is the case is seen from the following samples: “my voice,” “warehouse,” “armored tooth,” “unknown galaxy,” or the whole sentence, “Would you like me to lift you?” The idea of the horse or, if you prefer, the snake could be clarified by the Indian parable about the blind men trying to understand what an elephant is by groping it. For the blind man investigating its tail, it is a

snake; for the one touching its snout, it is a pipe; while the one who is groping its trunk, it is a well-fed horse. Little can be premised about the elephant: it seems to be created in the imagination by the limitations of the sense of perception that, according to the gist of that story, is common not only to the blind men but, in some ambiguous way, is characteristic of most people.

The sense of touch is the least subtle, yet the most trusted of all senses. Nobody can feel matter without its form, yet the true meaning of matter remains obscure. We know things that are made out of matter, but not matter per se, the matter that is one for all things. Little wonder, then, that under this approach “thing in itself” seems to suggest itself; and to give that idea an allegorical turn, we sewed a certain quantity of such “things in themselves” into the fabric of this artwork. That somewhat Trojan horse with a snaky body gives an illusion of physical solidity and tangibility; in mixing-up things, notions, and feelings, ascribed to its unidentified objects, it veils them even more. “Here I’m better than the president” or “on your left is on my right,” say some of the tags. Everything here is offered as a form of matter: not only the things inside but also the feelings that differ from them only by their subtler vibrations, something like sea waves in comparison with radio waves. In art, they both might be “groped” conceptually. Things can be diversified in an infinite number of ways while, taken all together, make up a kind of ouroborous that encircles humanity, which logic is mostly based on deceptive sense-impressions.

To escape the venomous ring of the ouroboros by traversing its head-and-tail lock is nearly impossible unless one is “deadly” gifted in asceticism and able to contract all physical desires to a virtually subatomic state allowing one to function entirely in one’s own consciousness. For to “squeeze” oneself through the security device of the time ouroboros, its head-and-tail clutch, one has to obtain such refined qualities that are not even supposed to exist in such a degree in any human creature. When the soul turns fully to the spirit, the ouroboros unlocks itself into a spiral. We would envision this as a series of curves gradually locking and circuiting around a central point: each turnover decreases the influence of time while it increases the presence of the spirit. According to Jacob Böhme, when “the spirit of love becomes

flesh,” the soul bursts the gates of the fire-wheel of this snake-husk. He sees the escape not via the road downwards (time is a downward flow), but upwards on the reanimated wings of the soul, fighting against time’s current “only upwards – above all the senses – does one draw breath and strengthen life.”³³ Should one succeed in unlocking the gates, a different sphere will surround the image of one’s transfigured soul – instead of the ouroboros’ dark glow, there will be the aureole of the mandorla (the oval symbol of transfiguration

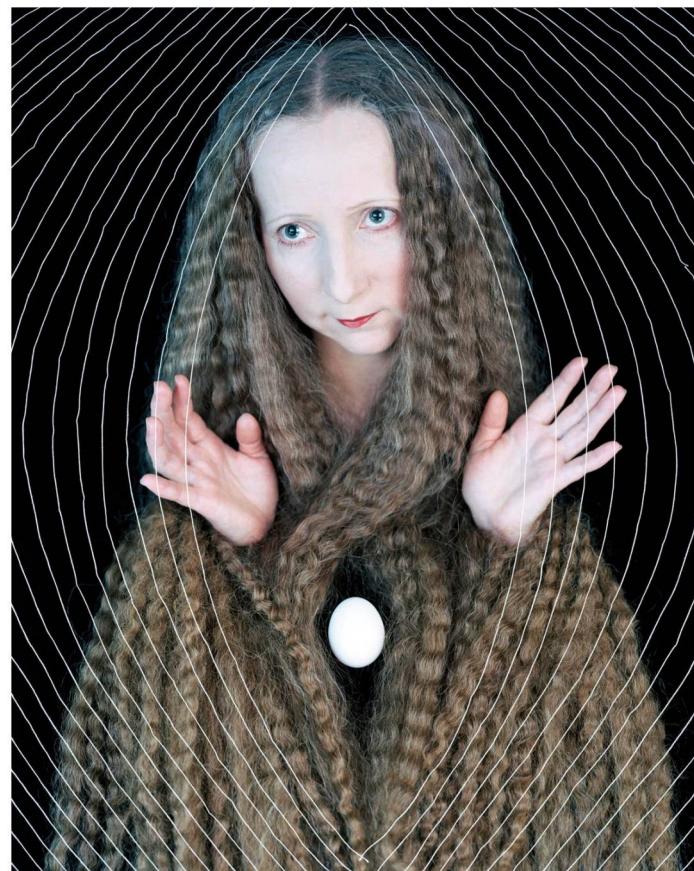
Convoluted Axis © 1990-94,
photo, metal, pencil



in the shape of *vesica piscis*), depicted around the figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary in medieval art.

The ouroboros, in its end-negating circle, serves as a keeper of mystery. In mythology, dragons ("drakon" is "serpent" in Greek) are employed for guarding treasures, eating people, and creating terror, chaos, fire, and other mean things. If life was to be maintained in a meaningful way, dragons were supposed to be overcome and used for the benefits of humans. In antiquity, they, or rather their reptilian siblings, always found their way into practical life. For example, in the temple of Athena in Athens, a serpent was kept in a cage as a guardian spirit of the temple. In Revela-

Radiation © 2004





Culmination © 1999

tion (20:3-8), the primeval dragon was defeated but not eliminated entirely, hence it was promised that before its final destruction (in the subconscious of the redeemed), it will squeeze itself out of the crevice to create the final round of chaos. One can take it as a morbid end of the fantasy that has a kind of patina like old paintings, interpret it as a symbol for the astral barrier at the last stage of the pilgrimage, or simply see it with the eyes of the naturalist incidentally trampling the tail of a snake that springs up to bite him.

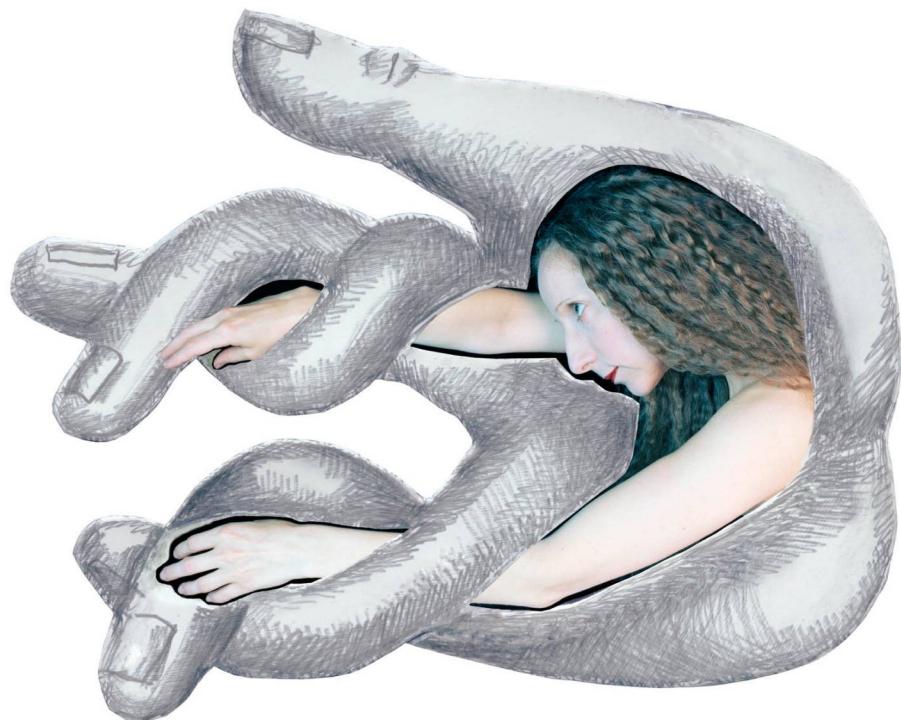
Representing both the astral world and the entire confinement in the Gnostic cosmos, the ouroboros symbolized Oceanus, the personification of the water-belt holding the waters of Babylon – the transient flux of the temporal. The circle of the zodiac with its 12 zodiacal gates is also a kind of tail-eating snake, the keeper of the time-bound destiny that controls all temporal things. Indeed, this celestial ouroboros works like a clock: as soon as the first 12 hours of a day have

passed, the next 12 hours begin. Everything is temporal while rolling in a non-stop time circuit that operates in the limited lump of space we inhabit in the universe. In that clockwork time mechanism, life is just a process, without a beginning or an ending. As the last barrier of the Earth-bound existence, the ouroboros with its mouth/tail gates is also a relative of Saturn (Cronos for the Greeks), the deity which ring symbolically controls the matter in its final almost subliminal aspect. The self-consuming feature of Saturn is mythologized in his repellent habit to swallow and regurgitate his children, thus reflecting the head and tail saga of the ouroboros. The rounds of its wheel of fortune, the blind fortune, to be exact, depend to a certain degree on one's ethical conduct, while the loop itself subsides in endless rotation with all its implicit limitations, including the pain and pleasure complex.

Remembering that a work of art might symptomize something else in addition to what it depicts, we framed the image *Between the Fingers* in the twisted hand of circumstances. The discomfort is captured well enough, yet for all its buffeting, life is worth all the worry and work it costs us. The psychodrama is frozen in the metal hand-like frame, exhibiting surreal firmness with an almost carnal sense of finger touch. In effect, *Between the Fingers* continues the saga of the ouroboros: the entwined fingers of nature bind, and to some extent preserve, similar to a trap of self-devouring consciousness feeding on its own creation. This process can be personified in many forms of energy-exchanging and energy-consuming relationships: between people and nature, man and the rest of the world, parent and child, husband and wife, or in an entirely individualistic mode of a self-feeding, self-debasing, or self-mortifying kind when everything is within the self. For example, the immune system influences the mental processes and an entire behavior often functions in this way when turning against its body and consuming its supporting force, usually not without reason.

In the extent of both metaphysical and physiological reaction, the ouroboros can be compared to the immune system, which in the case of autoimmune disorder begins to aim at itself with sickness unto death. Then, what are we to make of the immune system of the ouroboros itself, considering how it is consuming itself in the process of self-feeding? How does it support its body while eating it? What if that

tail-eater devours itself entirely, will it disappear into nothingness, into the void of its own stomach? Logically speaking, the process of self-consumption can lead to its completeness. As *reductio ad absurdum*, all problems of life are vanishing into thin air together with life itself. Given the

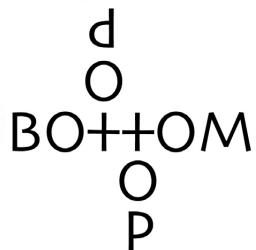


Between the Fingers ©
1995, photo, metal, pencil

mortality rate among all alive, it is quite possible, but the ouroboros is supposed to be perpetual, in some way, equivalent to immortal.

That leads us to another question concerning the miraculous change from death to life, smoothly perpetuated by the ouroboros within itself. What could one know about such a change? The mortality rate per unit of time is what we are entitled to know about life. So far, the rate of immortality was not disclosed to us mortals; and we have not even a foretaste

of life beyond the grave. But according to quantum theories undermining the solid reality, even if it vanishes into thin air, something else must be left (to hope for). What if we, like the ouroboros, pass through the similarly miraculous change from death to life, even if we do so less smoothly? It would be too traditional to clothe this idea in theological garb by saying that there shall be no immortality except through the soul and the spirit, to which our bodily form is appended. Even with the lofty quality of the intellect, it would not be easy to perceive existence within non-existence and vice versa. No ratio exists between the infinite and finite unless emblematically we ascribe it to the ouroboros that, being a modem of nature itself, always survives its own burial. It can arrive on the literary scene and make an anthropomorphic appearance, like in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, as "end-negating Fin-negan," risen by the sound of the popping cork, thus giving a jolly illustration of how the dead head can be reawakened by the drunken tail.



In our explanations, we try to keep a distance between the image of the ouroboros and a common snake in the grass. Nevertheless, there is an apparent connection between mythic reality and animal instinct that might be "extracted" from the ever-circling mythological creature. When the ouroboros is exasperated by its self-repeating drudgery, it is ready to jump out of its skin and appear as a mythological serpent. With its perverse faculty of leveling the field between good and evil, it can easily create a setting for itself and everything else, which would be a harsh reality for humankind to wake up to. Taking the form of the serpent, the ambitious reptilian force of nature encircles the tree of life in biblical paradise. Having targeted its victim with its eyes moving with cunning seduction, the smooth-muscled serpent slipped along the branches ready for its sultry speech. Eve befriended this

snake, and that event paved the way for further matters that need no explanation. However, the question arises why the serpent approached Eve, not Adam. Circulating in the womb of nature, the fiery serpentine force is part of the reproductive matter and chthonian depth of *life* – and the very meaning of the name Eve is “life.” According to the scriptural account, she accepts the apple from the “hands” of the wise snake and does it with natural feminine sensitivity. Eventually, the far-reaching and widespread effect of that unfortunate event must be reverted because, in keeping with God’s promise (Genesis 3:15), the seed of the woman will crush the serpent’s head.

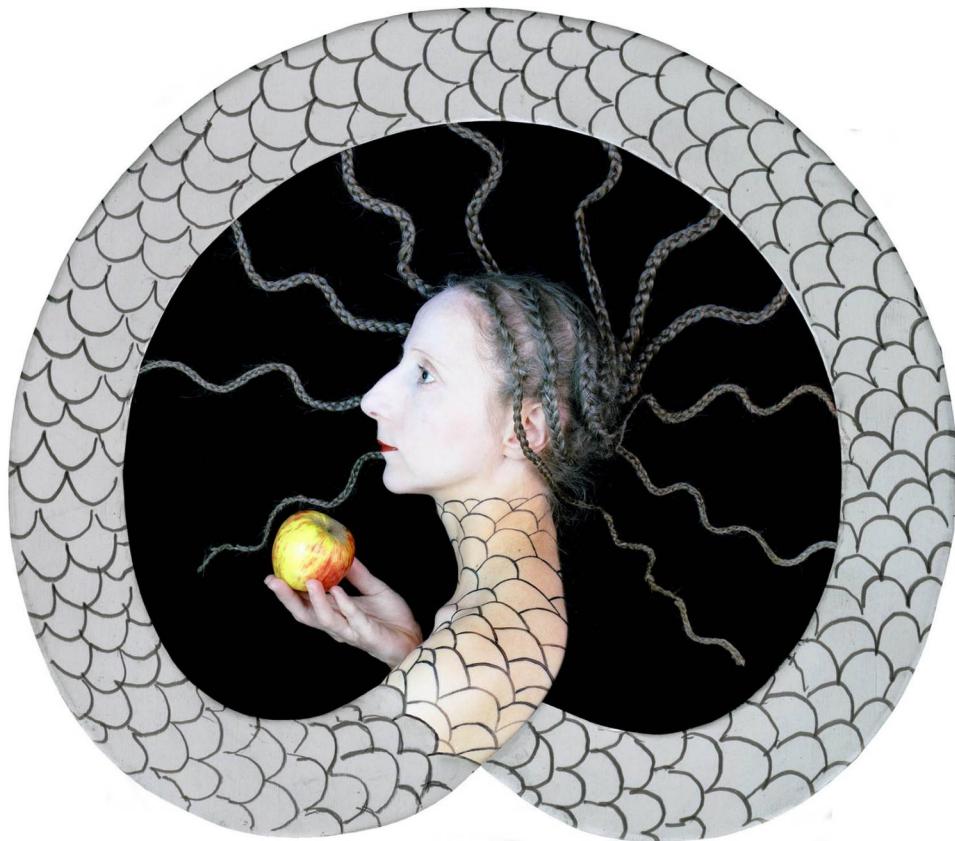
Around the Tree © 1998



In *Ouroboros with Apple*, we abridged the famous parable, fusing Eve, the serpent, and the solar braided rays in one single unit, symbolically presenting the feminine force as a food-giver and food at the same time. The process of “tail eating” in nature looks like a wanton waste of material: creating and killing without ceasing and without reverence to life destroyed. Instinctively proliferating, life lives on life. In other words, surviving is predatory, often in a gruesome way. Glittering and splendid, the serpent is a symbolic guardian of these latent forces of nature and its alluring fruits.

The flexibility of Eve matches that of the quicksilver dragon whether it coils or springs up with a cunning surprise.

Ouroboros with Apple
© 1994 – 2006, photo,
aluminum, felt pen



Thus, in the rounded image *Ouroboros with Apple*, her neck makes a circuit around her head beaming with braids, while in the vertical *Eve with Apple*, she twists her legs around the invisible tree like a serpent, presenting on her foot the apple of knowledge, the fruit outshining all known fruitage with emblematic significance. Such is the language of nature, parabolic as the spiral of a serpent, never straight and perceptible. In art, the reptilian force of nature can take unpredict-

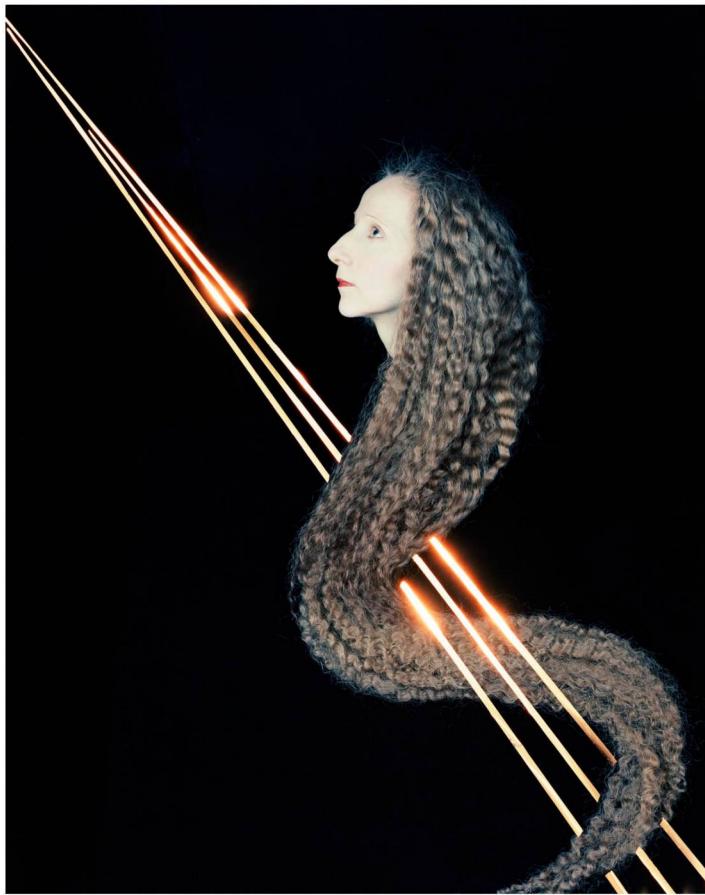
Eve with the Apple © 1994,
photos, metal, pencil



able forms, for its restless experimental spirit can contort itself into fantastic shapes. “It is the mystery of the sad-eyed serpent of Darkness wrapping itself round the lower limbs of the Light,” wrote G.R.S. Mead in *Trice Greatest Hermes*.³⁴

The hybridization of genetically different elements of Biblical background (snakes, apples, and women) gives only half the answer, or perhaps even less. Our works are not meant to assert the solid reality to the visionary world, and we have no way of visualizing the spiritual except as a kind of purer natural. And the thing is, the significant thing is, that a man is a medium of connection between them, the spiritual and the natural, to the extent that as a medium he is not too grounded in matter. Holding on material things might be enchanting, but eventually, it is no more or no less than sour grapes. The permanence of repetitions in nature (seeding – blooming – wilting – dying – seeding – blooming and so on) does not give us a solution, yet the promising shift still exists, and it would be too difficult upon the humankind if it were otherwise. It is true or true enough, at least regarding non-ordinary ways of thinking, that the spirit of faith can overcome all spirits of nature, including the reptilian one.

The Biblical episode connecting our ancestors with snakes and apples has been foreshadowed by other myths, the Ancient Greek myth about the golden apples of the Hesperides is one of them. Three Hesperides (Vespers in the Roman version), the goddesses/nymphs of the evening, daughters of Night, were somewhat similar to mermaids notorious for luring mortals. Their precious tree with the golden apples, granting immortality when eaten, was also guarded by the earthbound serpent of destiny, laid hidden in the dark hollows of the earth until the solar hero Heracles showed up. It is interesting to note that two out of his twelve labors were connected with the reptilian creatures: one was slaying the hundred-headed dragon and fetching the golden apples of the Hesperides, the other was defeating the serpentine water monster named Hydra, who was guarding the entrance to the Underworld. Hydra also had many poisonous heads that could immediately regrow whenever they were cut off. Of course, one can take that creature as a mere figure of rhetoric or interpret it as the kinds of obstinately persistent problems with which people worry themselves into madness. Yet, biologically speaking, nature is indeed capable of self-repairing



Twining © 1998

to the point of reprogramming the cells to reconstruct a limb. In this regard, *Science* magazine informs us that “In the mid-1700s, for instance, Swiss researcher Abraham Trembley noted that when chopped into pieces, hydra – tubelike creatures with tentacles that live in fresh water – could grow back into complete, new organisms... And a century later, Thomas Hunt Morgan scrutinized planaria, flatworms that can regenerate even when whittled into 279 bits.”³⁵ Alas, we humans are deprived of that marvelous possibility.

Returning from harsh biological facts to fiction, we have to point out that in the astronomy of mythological life,

Heracles enters its orbit not only because of his labors but also because his solar power possesses exhilarating properties. With all the crowns that the Greeks bestowed on Heracles, that one has an astronomical significance for the solar apex is placed in the constellation Hercules. He concurred the Hydra by raising her high over his head towards the sunlight, thus she shriveled and died. The creatures of darkness cannot bear the light (especially of a spiritual kind), and when exposed to it they lose their connection with their chthonic source, with so-called *terra damnata et maledicta*, the sinister darkness of the instinctual subconscious.

It may sound paradoxical and unjustified but in mythology, the universal energy, hidden deep in man, also has reptilian features. One can recognize them in the Kundalini serpent, the Chinese winged dragon of light that symbolizes cosmic descent of spirit in matter, the Ancient Greek caduceus entwined by two snakes, or the Aztec plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl that grows the wings of the spirit by swallowing his own venom. The intuitive experience of that hidden energy might be expressed in mystical visions that come close to strange physical phenomena or strange events that evoke a spontaneous response that stirs the psyche. The watchful snakes guard the threshold between the physical and the magical realms, between the world and the underworld. In Christian paradise, the serpent is a guardian of the knowledge of good and evil; it enkindles the poisonous learning in seekers. The shadow of the old snake survives in the modern approach towards life, characteristic of identifying evil with good. That is what men found out for themselves by circling within the yang-yin ouroboros, which, as could be expected, keeps them in the half-light and half-darkness that alludes to the successive counterbalancing of the opposing forces.

As a cosmological symbol, the ouroboros has an interchangeable nature from imperceptibly smooth to violently harsh, with all possible shades in-between. Appearing in light and disappearing in corruptible matter, and vice versa, it guides all creaturehood from birth to death, giving bright hopes, and taking them back while circling endlessly and indefinitely. The end is invisibly present in the beginning, while the beginning is always visible in the end. The circle repeats itself over and over again, carrying within it the same

experience, each time in a slightly updated version. But all this is done to a certain point. When one is prepared to grasp the arcane principle of the meta-serpent, which is responsible on top of everything else for spiritual rebirth, everything in this person's life begins to change: the situation and ambiance



Sun Totem © 1995,
photo, metal, pencil

surrounding him, as well as his mindset and even his genes. The knowledge and intellectual training can lead one to good and to evil, but the virtue of wisdom (that includes knowledge of both) seems to be the highest of all. When it is reached, things look differently, and upon closer inspection, the dangerous snake might turn out to be a rope.

With the ouroboros, we can express both a permanent repetition and an uninterrupted continuum rendered by the Sufi in a karmic way, “every cause is the effect of its own effect.”³⁶ The chain of the effects might bend and twist the round circle of the ouroboros. In the arsenal of contemporary science, there is a theory of space-time curvature that might add another serpentine bend to the good old ouroboros. Beyond the existing theories, the relationship between time and space might be described as oblique; and, relying on the poetic truth, we tried to express that obliqueness in a wordplay slightly resembling a formula.

NOWHERE
NOWHERE

“Nowhere” exists in “now here” and vice versa, “now here” disappears in “nowhere.” It depends whether you insert an interval or not, dealing with the concepts of “hereness” as actual presence and “nowhereness” as absence. Fused together, “now” grounds in nowhere, making the circuit of “no/w/here” both full and empty, now and never, or rather, God knows, where and when. That is how our time-bound consciousness follows the “steps” of the ouroboros, within which circumrotation time is always

S∞N

Impregnated by the infinity symbol, the twisted wheel of the ouroboros approaches the border between mythology and science. On close examination, the repetition of the cyclic pattern expresses timeless stasis. It means that life is framed in the same sequence of begetting, multiplying, and slaying. In Gnostic view, it “passes through all things” and binds all together, “running without running, moving without motion.” Put another way, this philosophical dragon is indeed a picture of a *perpetuum mobile*.

Returning to the space-time curvature on which physicists and other scientists like to theorize, we wish to know, or at least to imagine, the limits of their banding. Does it follow that the time and space “band” can curve until linking up into a circle, within which “every cause produces the effect of its own effect”? Does the ouroboros change its substance when it is twisted like the infinity symbol? Or does it not, merely implying that any apparent changes will remain everunchanging? The beginning always comes to the end that in turn is swallowed up by the beginning, always hurrying to the

The Thinker © 1995,
photo, metal, pencil



end. All belongs to One and returns to it, rotating around it ceaselessly. Apparently, this what Mircea Eliade had in mind when giving his book the lofty title *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. All who are born return to the origin of their birth for receiving the renewed forms, producing selves out of the Self. “Only the snake knows its feet, only the Self knows a self,” says the Hindu proverb.

As the sign of infinity, the ouroboros needs but a flick of the wrist to turn itself into *Möbius Strip*, another example of a vicious circle. Give a strip of paper a half-twist, then glue its ends together; then, to visualize its bewildering properties, begin to move, let's say, the letter “A” around the band.

Magnet © 1993,
photos, metal





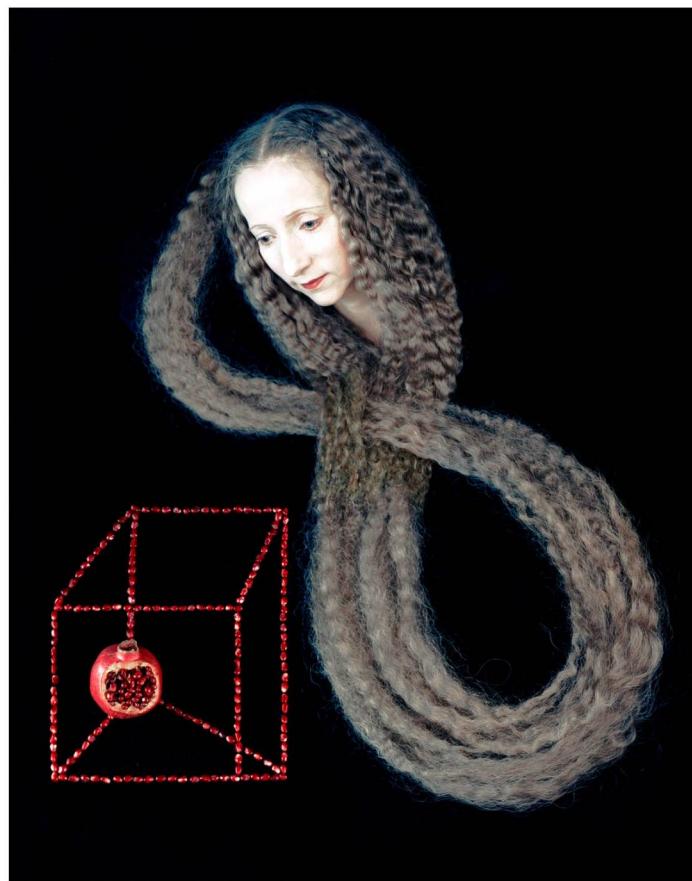
Möbius Strip © 1993,
photos, metal

To your surprise, it will return to its starting place as “ \forall ” an upside-down mirror image. Similarly, if you send a right glove through that strip, you will get it back as a left glove. To a great extent, properties of the ouroboros, its head-and-tail, right-and-left game, can be represented by a half-twisted *Möbius Strip*, on both sides of which life is endlessly circulating like the procession of ants grotesquely pictured on M.C. Escher’s woodcut *Möbius Strip II*. In their dull, monotonous trip, the ants always return to their starting point having traversed every part of the strip without ever crossing an edge. The infinity of that somewhat hallucinogenic trip, trap, strap, strip... is rigorously fixated. Attached to their collective industry, the ants are ever busy with the circulating, making their ends meet in a more than literal sense. With this veritable whirl of activity, seen from the perspective of the social psychology, the ouroboros might be presented as a model of

society, at least the kind that lashes people to the great wheel of uniformity. In a spiritual sense, it is a road towards guaranteed disaster: by living a life in monotonous conformity, any sensitive individual would experience the type of symptoms that might be classified as soul-locking nightmares. That seems how Escher envisioned the unthinking law of habits and conventions.

Let us look at one more version of the ouroboros, now circling in the *Kline Bottle*. This vessel is like an egg: its end is hatching its beginning. Twisting to infinity, it shows how the outer and the inner are linked, thus adding extra properties to the rendition of the ouroboros. What is obvious is that

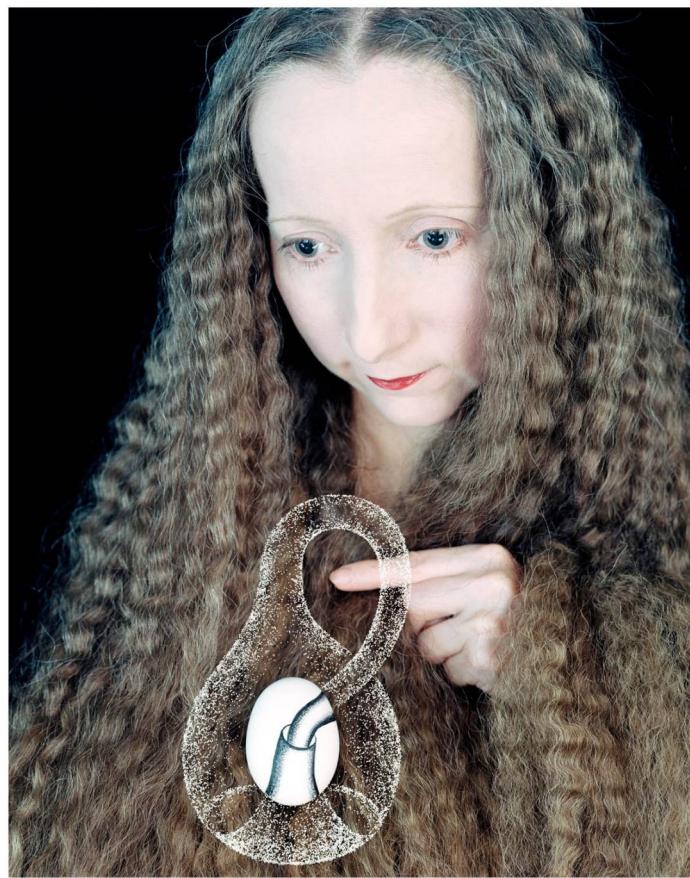
Triangled Cube © 1998



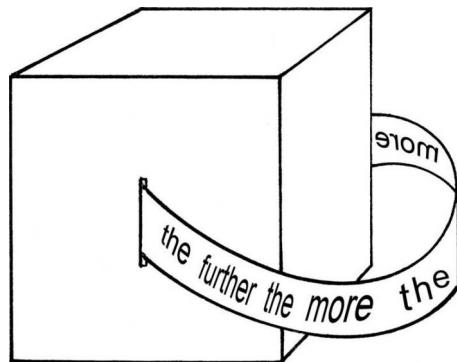
the crooked topological bottle presents one more mousetrap – it contains itself – turning the inside into the outside and vice versa. A true *Kline Bottle* is realizable only in imagination, in art, and in four-dimensional space, which is regrettably not of our universe. Only in a dream, we can (can we?) be inside the dream and outside it at the same time. All our ideas about this subject would be mixed up with their opposites, not twisted in conflict, but smoothly overlapping or including each other. To that, we are tempted to add that if scientists analyze the *Kline Bottle* theoretically, artists envision it with the simplicity of unquestioning acceptance.

Speaking of the real life, the ambiguous ouroboros even

Kline Bottle © 2002



managed to introduce practical sense into dreams, better to say, half-dreams, half-memories, half-theories. In order to not be unduly speculative, we would like to back this up with supporting evidence; *zum Beispiel*, the nineteenth-century German chemist F. A. Kekule discovered the molecular structure of benzene with the help of the ouroboros. He dreamed of a snake biting its tail and upon waking up, he converted his reptilian vision into the formula of a closed carbon ring, or, simply, benzene. Both *Möbius Strip* and *Kline Bottle* were discovered only in the nineteenth century, but it would be difficult to deny that they inherited their inexplicable kinkiness, as well as their delightful abstract properties so dear to mathematicians, from the much older ouroboros.



R. G. *The Further the More*:
this text is repeated continuously along the strip, 1975

Returning our thoughts to our Russian past, we find that the abstract geometrical object *The Further, the More* had already followed the principle of unending continuity, touching the same idea of spatial and temporal infinity, metaphorically ascribed to the ouroboros. The cube (one of the Platonic bodies, a symbol of three-dimensional space and static dense matter) is pierced by the ouroboric loop with the inscription “the further the more.” Do we really get “more” from the promise of “further”? We dare say this basic concept demonstrates the static and dynamic principles of *prima materia* in a simple way, abstracted from the references to the snakes, time loops, or circulations in nature. With all its

blossoms and fruits, nature cares not for what is more important – the harvesting of autumn or the seeding of spring – one is there only to express the other.

It would be reasonable to interpret the ouroboros as a logical paradox with a dialectical interplay between the beginning and the end, but in its “body and soul,” it is a prototype of a vicious circle. What could be more vicious than eating yourself? Disintegrating, the body fertilizes the brain that, in its turn, reintegrates the body. In the flux of life, the ouroboros’ head (brain and mind, for that matter) continues in its body; and it is not clear what organ is responsible for thinking and making decisions. In the incessant pursuit of its end, the merry-go-round snake is spontaneously responsive. Circulating its mind in its body, it is happily plotless in swinging from smooth to impulsive. What if we picture its instinctive impulses as a wordplay, in concrete poetry fashion. In dissecting the word “intuitive” in a cyclic way, we may trace the *in-to-it-if* movements of the ouroboros’ body.

TO



Clearly, an “intuitive” circulation requires a certain dosage of “iffyness,” expressed here misspelled. Dedicated to serving mainly spontaneous interests, the mind can dart from impulse to impulse and have absolutely no conception of anything being wrong with it. But we would not rate the chances of an individual’s instinctive mind against the serpent’s programming that only seems incidental. Harboring surprises of an unpleasant nature, the quicksilver dragon poisons itself with its own dim spontaneous feelings. With grim constancy, that interaction is replayed at the unconscious level on an individual basis. When the ouroboros impregnates itself merely with physical activity and an emotional mood, it is just what it ought to be, and it looks what it is – twisted in conflict. Those who are pulled different ways by their moods follow this pattern without even noticing it. As to practical sense-oriented people, they rely only on information, not knowledge or even more so, on wisdom. Dry

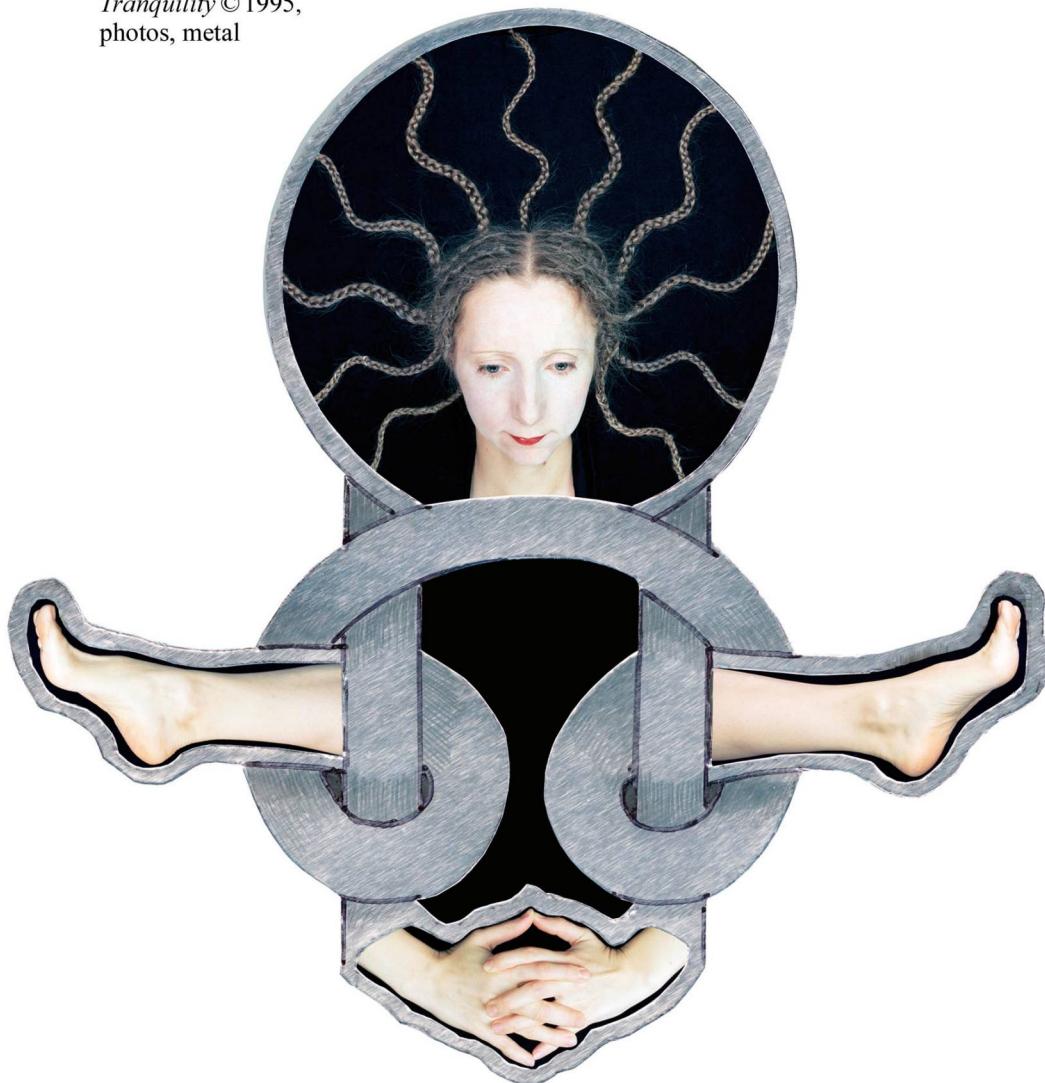
practicality and brainless physical activity attract such a program of the ouroboros that slows down and constraints, if not altogether freezes the inner development of individuals. People follow the patterns of nature that suit their characters best even if they are damaging or limited to rudimentary principles.

We must not forget that the ouroboros is a multidimensional and multi-sectoral creature which explanation and hence exploration might be completely circular. When its unconscious qualities are controlled or organically blocked by willful labors, it begins to exhibit its beneficial side. Taking into account the migration of symbols, the familiar shape of the ouroboros can be traced in the yoga asana named "Cobra," the posture in which the feet touch the back of the head. The Hatha Yoga sources insist that by the practice of this posture that imitates the cobra with its hood raised, the serpent-goddess (the kundalini force) is activated, vertebra-by-vertebra. Then the curse of the ouroboros is reversed: its non-ending circular movement is interrupted by the fiery power of the kundalini that burns its way as it spirals up. Its reptilian force is like electricity – derived from the universal power, it is impersonal and accelerating. A man rarely knows his power that comes from the universal source. Naturally, some individuals try to gain it by combining various strong physical exercises, mental discipline, and devotional firmness. We paid tribute to those and people of similar intentions by creating the conceptual images blending various metaphors. Such is a yogi sitting on a rope, whose arms and legs are bent in the infinity symbol as if it is a tamed twisting ouroboros. Staying away from the literal expressions of the symbols, we imply them only to stimulate thinking conducive to spiritual development. If one is to imitate the symbols too closely, it might only distort the truth.

Now, if we continue thinking in the direction of the kundalini serpent, it will be evident that it is a close reptilian relative to the ouroboros. In the dormant state, kundalini is said to lie coiled at the base of the spine while keeping its latent energy stored deep around the spinal axis. As we already mentioned, Lord Vishnu, the preserving deity of the Hindu pantheon, is usually depicted sleeping on the coiled serpent Ananta-Sesha as though on a bed, where in his dream he is creating the universe. This cosmic serpent keeps life

energy in an unpolarized state maintained before the process of creation. The serpent's coils wreath the basis of the world's axis, just like the kundalini force stored in the basic *Muladhara* chakra located at the low spinal center. The same energy flows in the universe and in the human circulatory system. In mythology and, perhaps, not only there, the macro scheme and the micro scheme have the identical source.

Tranquility © 1995,
photos, metal



In its active phase, the fiery power of kundalini burns its way up, making spirals around the axis of the body. Along with the shocks, it gives a tremendous stimulation to the nervous system, then one's whole nature begins to change. The ratio between the details and the generalities increases with the development of the mind, making it able to grasp the most abstract concepts. Seen from the side, this twisting life formation whirls like a linear spiral while, from above or below, it looks like a circle. Reflecting the principle of the creation, the kundalini whirls also as a circle, or rather as a bagel, pressed out of the spiral. Both points are valid, presenting the life force in wavy and cyclical movements, making

Ribs © 1997



joint equilibrium of continuation and retention. *De facto*, to use the legal nomenclature, one event linearly follows the other while, *de jure*, it is a rather topological thing, that is one event is located within the other as a primary bond pressed into one simultaneous property of the ouroboros. Moreover, such periodical mutations in the sublunary region are expressed in constant changes in form but not in essence. The ancients knew about that flux, as J.R.S. Mead wrote commenting *Chaldean Oracles*, “The ‘ever-circling’ is the principle of self-motivity. On the spiral-side of things, there is a procession to infinity; while on the sphere-side beginnings and ends are immediate and ‘at once.’”³⁷ As to a scientific way

Mirror © 2005



of perceiving the world, here too the parallel with the ancient concepts continues. The topological property assigned by the physicists to objects always remains unchanged behind many appearances however an object is distorted: stretched or shrunk as a piece of rubber.

After establishing correspondences between the circle and the spiral, we can push our thoughts further, perhaps, further than they need or ought to go, i.e., out of the ouroboros. What is to be expected when the gates of the nature-bound clockwork circle burst open? Joseph Campbell abridged the possible answer by pointing out the parental lineage behind that idea: “In Orpheus and Christ, we have exactly the same archetype... they leave the Earth, symbol of Mother to go to the realm of the Father... You are kept in exile by your commitment to that world... for the world as it was for you has indeed ended.”³⁸ The end must not be understood in its literal physical aspect.

The myth about Orpheus, the divine singer, ends with the story of his decapitation by the infuriated maenads (the female followers of trans-inducing Dionysus). However, his head continues to live by itself and delivers oracles. Speaking the language of mythology, here we come to another parallel of the head and the tail amalgam. In the hermetic interpretation of the old alchemical text *Script by Albert about the Tree of Aristotle*, the head “lives in eternity” and “the angels serve it.” “The whole body obeys the head, and the head hates the body, and slays it beginning from the tail, by gnawing it with its teeth, until the whole body enters into the head and remains there forever.”³⁹

The Indian parable about the so-called Face of Glory cited previously in the context of *Manyness* is also related to the saga of the self-consuming ouroboros. When the ambitious demon attained the high power of intellect after performing extraordinary austerities, he dared to challenge Mahadeva Shiva, the principal ruler of mental properties. But stricken by Shiva’s third eye, he began eating his own flesh – until there was nothing left but his face. Delighted with that self-consuming mystery, Shiva named what we can call what’s left of the demon “Face of Glory” and appointed him as such to a position similar to that of St. Peter, namely, at the heavenly gate to ward off evil. The spectacular and agonizing event led the ambitious creature to mental self-conquest,



Phallic Egg © 2002

which gave him the privilege of guarding others against similar weaknesses.

The never-ending trip within the ouroboros, the circle of necessity, finally ends when the soul breaks through the last “fence of iniquity.” That particular stage is so much feared by the profane world that it condemns everyone who tries to trespass this ring. Placing all that is said in a realm of poetic truth, we have to consider that in the antiquity nothing was written openly: the symbols and enigmatic axioms were supposed to stress the memory only tentatively, which was enough for those latently connected to the mystery to retain

their connections. For that matter, art might not be a less imaginative “prefiguration” of the truth than any trance-theological revelation.

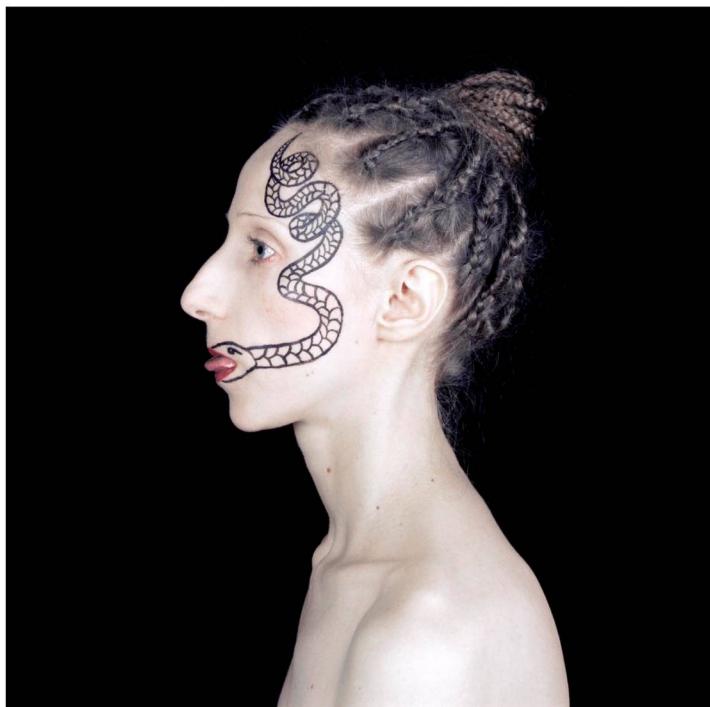
Before we leave the reptilian subject, we shall cast a glance at the serpent as a symbol of a tongue. In the stream of different mythological traditions, many deities created whatever they wished by literally uttering a single word. Associated with its quicksilver tongue, serpentine knowledge is both illuminating and dangerous. The gap between these two is reflected in the semi-forgotten folk belief that the malicious viper is an antitype of the serpent of wisdom – they are two poles of the same axis. Taking the form of the tongue, as it is envisioned in the image *Serpent*, it symbolizes among others *logos spermatikos* or the fecundating word. As such, it dawns upon man, coming as a brain-wave or as a lightning bolt of thought and speech. In its genetic garb, spermatozoid is also a miniature procreative draconic force that plunges in the virgin soil of the matrix of the world.

The serpent is “fate itself, swift as disaster, deliberate as retribution, incomprehensive as destiny,” says an encyclopedia of traditional symbols.⁴⁰ It protects knowledge with poison. From time immemorial, it was considered a medium and an instrument in the “rites of passage,” in which the fiery tongue of the serpent was lighting the candles of the

i n i t i a t i o n .

Here is one example among others. The illumination of Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the order of Jesuits, was accompanied by the prolonged vision of a serpent, shining and dazzling with a brilliant light. Truly alone with it, Loyola found himself the object of its stern and almost disembodied scrutiny. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, he warned his followers against that tempting voice, which is “always at war against the serenity of the mind” with “some sophistic arguments that present themselves with the semblance of truth... The good thoughts are taken as a pretext at the beginning, it gradually removes and pours his poison into them, going from bad to worse day after day.”⁴¹ In spite of its strictly religious form, this warning has a trance-theological keenness of observation: how the process of inculcation that implants destructive ideas operates in general.

In some proximity to this religious exposition is the visual alchemical manuscript known as Barchusen's series *The Crown of Nature*, picturing a similar process of how a mental serpent gradually invades consciousness and life. The sequence of the engravings depicts the same flask in which the sulfuric solar serpent cascades through various stages.



Serpent © 1989

Looming up, it impregnates, ferments, and cleaves the lunar egg. Finally, it consumes itself like the ouroboros leaving as its vestige the philosopher stone. The comments follow: "In the hour of his death, his venom becomes the greatest medicine. He quickly consumes his own venom, for he devours his own poisonous tail, all this is performed on his own body, from which flows forth glorious balm, withal its miraculous virtues. Hereat all the sages do loudly rejoice."⁴²

This is just like the Aztec plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl that turns his own poison inward and, digesting it, transforms it into life-giving nectar by sacrifice and love. Then, upon growing the wings of the spirit, he returns to its immaterial absolute source.

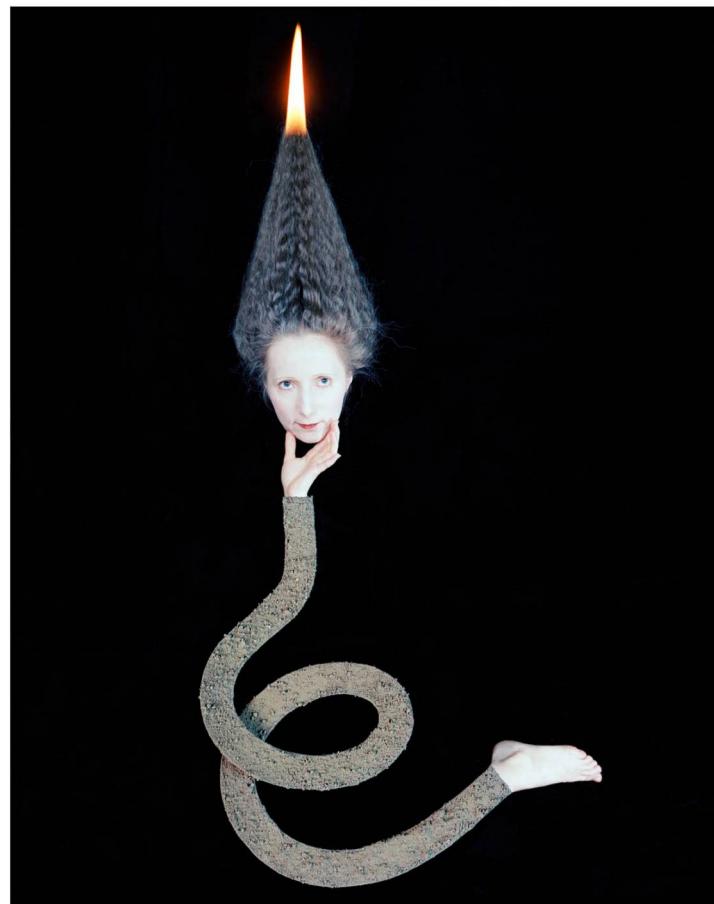
According to various sutras on Yoga, the power of speech (envisioned as the tongue of a serpent) is stored in the *Vishuddha* chakra located in the throat near the thyroid gland. Activated by certain practices, it causes intuitive flashes that in some cases might dazzle with a brilliant light. In this fifth chakra, god Shiva is depicted in his androgynous aspect holding a snake-ring. Entering the fire ring of Shiva, yogis are said to experience his blazing tongue, shaped like a twisted needle. At that stage, the meditations on echo are prescribed, which helps “to realize that all words, pleasant and unpleasant, are illusory as the echoes themselves.”⁴³ With the opening of this chakra, the aspirant steps beyond the world of concepts and receives the ability to use “the spoken word of truth.” And the words “truth” and “hurt” seem to reflect each other; for some strange reason, they often come in tandem. That is why the utterance of truth has to be cautious, gentle, and charitable. Before the tongue can speak (from a higher level of consciousness), it has to lose the power to wound.

The stinging power of hostility (one of the aspects of the mercurial serpent) causes constant conflict in life, turning everybody and everything against each other. If it is not slain or rather self-consumed, it will be pulling personal and impersonal aspects of life into chaos. The dangerous “astral” element of the serpent plays on the weaknesses of the low reasoning of the libido and its aggressive tendencies. It bears sinister instinctual features, a reptilian way of thinking, with its dangerous wit and bitter salt of *anima mundi*. As if under hypnosis, people follow their fixed action patterns. Basic instinct crawls into the human psyche like a reptile, practicing its rattlesnake eye on the human soul as if it is a poor defenseless bird. In many ways, basic instinct destructively poisons the nature of every man.

Naturally, the hissing tongues of the many serpents of Medusa come from the same source as the fiery tongue of the dreadful Indian Kali who licks up the blood of the living. Aside from mythological repulsive peculiarities and legacies left over from the days of the beast, the wicked tongue

expresses these emotions and attitudes that, from the psychological perspective, might be identified as bad states of mind. Even in our language, there are more words for negative emotions than for positive ones. No doubt that inhibited animosity easily damages normal life by gradually constricting it, while growing open resentments usually erupt in the most inappropriate moments. The damage done with the tongue might spread deeper than one is aware of, impalpable and often hidden under the false sociable disguise. Therefore, one of the first warnings in Yoga is: should a yoga practitioner try to arise the serpent force of the kundalini before he has rid

Earthly Serpent © 1997

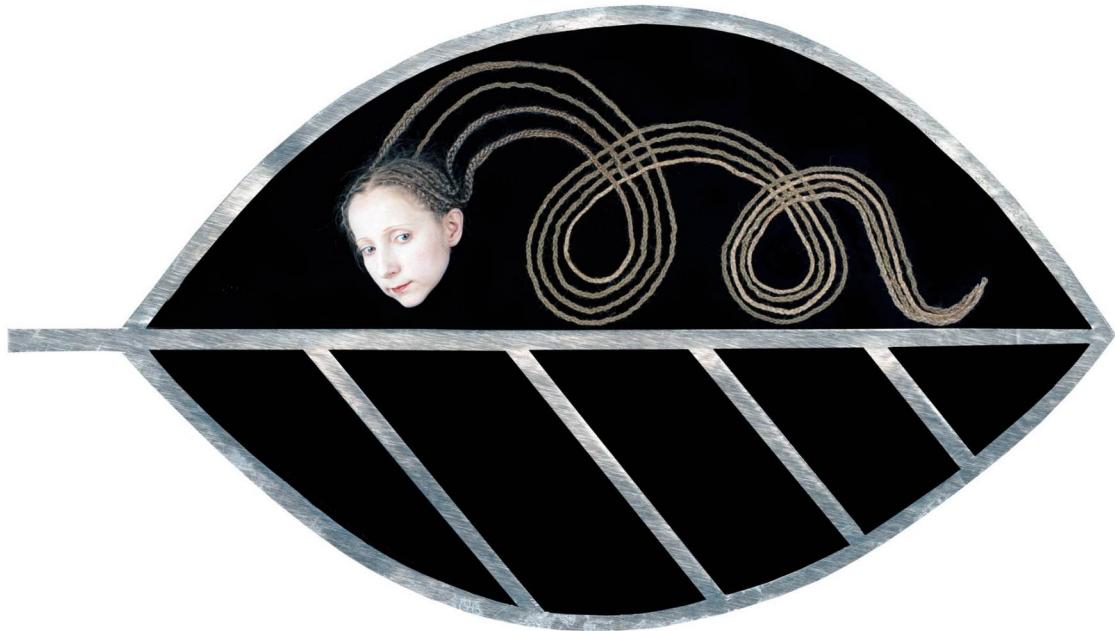


himself of anger and hate, he will mercilessly become a victim of his own hatred.

An earthbound serpent, called “master of the bowels of the earth and the underworld,” can creep everywhere. Moving without legs, it appears and disappears suddenly and unpredictably. Dwelling in crevices of nature as an invisible latent power, it symbolizes the corruptive tendency of the natural law of survival, at its acquisitive and selfish core. Chthonic, deliberately treacherous reptilian mind always hides for you a snake in the grass. Its cold-blooded venomous actions are dictated by unconscious perverse impulses, all geared only for personal advantages. Referring to the hallmark of the ecclesia, the ideal of the old serpent, loaded with disordered self-love, is to be as God or to be God itself. Sometimes it seems uncertain whether we are witnessing God’s kingdom on earth or something more sinister. Possibly, the similar doubts have passed the mind of St. Ignatius of Loyola, who tried to find a clue for his vision of the dazzling Luciferian brilliance in the self-created serpent of mind.

However murky and ambivalent the old serpent is, it also rules the fiery rain of fertilization and is capable of renewing itself by sloughing its skin. Periodically, we have to put in a word for it, relying on the verified sources. In the Greco-Roman mythology, the god of medicine Aesculapius frequently appeared in the form of a serpent. The healing snake cures the wounds made by the poisonous one. Homeopathy is based on this weird and wonderful correlation. Goddess of health Hygeia, from whose name we inherited the word “hygiene,” emblematically bears a serpent in her hands. The blood coming from the right side of a Gorgon is so remedial that it could bring the dead back to life, while the blood on her left side is an instant poison. There are two entwined snakes on the caduceus of Hermes (Mercury), whose staff is chosen internationally for the medical logo. Like the caduceus, the rod of Moses in the form of a serpent of brass was used for the healing of the punished murmuring crowd on which a scourge of fiery serpents was sent (Numb. 21:8). The emblem of St. John the Evangelist is also a serpent in a chalice. All this symbolism might make one wonder at the strange ways in which nature works. The latter example is especially interesting.

In the astrological patterns with the four evangelists in



Leaf © 1993, photo, metal

many medieval illuminated manuscripts, St. John was often represented by an eagle. In the past, an eagle signified the contemporary Scorpius constellation; and its emblem, a scorpion, is associated with a snake by “virtue” of their mutual venomous habits. It might strike one as strange that the eighth sign of the zodiac Scorpio, a sign of death and rebirth, represents the fusion of the two opposing dynamic forces, expressed by the images of the airy eagle and the chthonic snake. In a time when these allegories were brought into existence, the apocalyptic visions of St. John the Divine could also influence them. The secret behind them (and the word “apocalypses” means “disclosure,” Gr.), might be described as an “adoption” of the end to the beginning – the death-rebirth complex. Behind the seemingly complex astrological eagle-snake allegory one can trace an everlasting *modus operandi* of nature: raising the serpent high in the sky, the eagle throws it out on the rocks, thus killing its venomous counterpart.

We have no intention to assert the solid reality of the



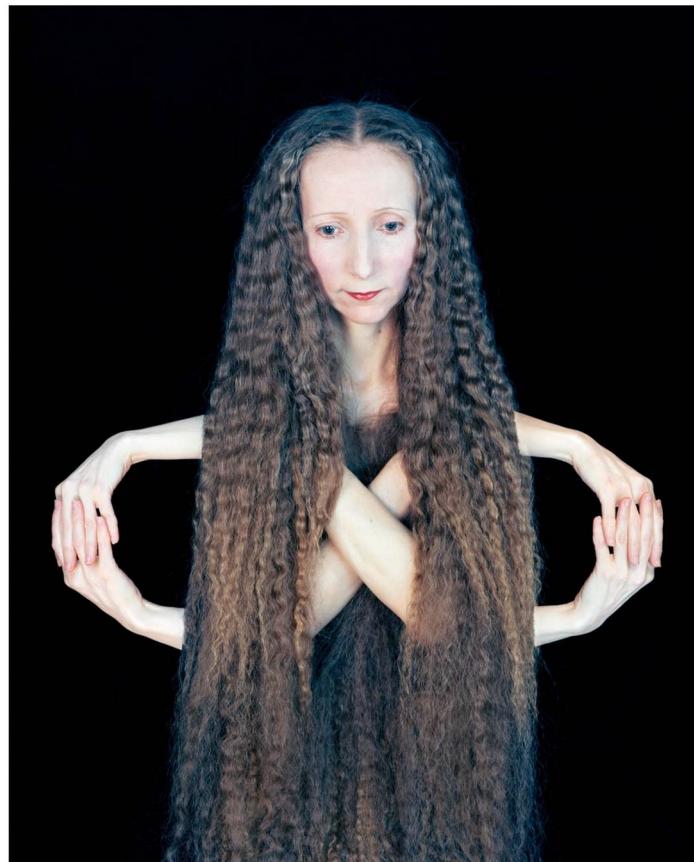
Bird Attendant © 1998

visionary world, yet it would not be out of place to revert to certain vivid associations. An interesting fact to reflect upon is that in the summer of 2012 in a nearby park, we saw how an eagle picked up a snake. Raised high, showing certain verve to its escalating movement, the mighty bird flew away, carrying along the wriggling snake. It seemed that we were witnessing the alchemical picture of the termination of the law coagula et dissolve or the principle of the ouroboros. As if a dramatization of a medieval bestiary, it was confirming the victory of the rising spiritual principle over the chthonic circulation. For those who accept things only as they are, that event has no enigmatic aspect; as to us, we felt we were wit-

nessing something rising to nearly mythological status.

By slaying the lower nature, the higher nature becomes free. Similarly, Heracles raises Hydra towards the rays of the Sun and exposes the dark unconscious and poisonous wit to the light of the illuminating mind. It means among others that the clarity of thinking makes up steps outside cloudy feelings. Whichever of the two approaches dominate in the private or public life, neither of them ever loses its influence. In mythology, the gap between them is bridged without controversy. The plumed Aztec serpent and the Chinese solar dragon, both reptiles, can fly high in the sky, thus merging both substances of the consciousness – the airy and the

Ad Infinitum © 1998

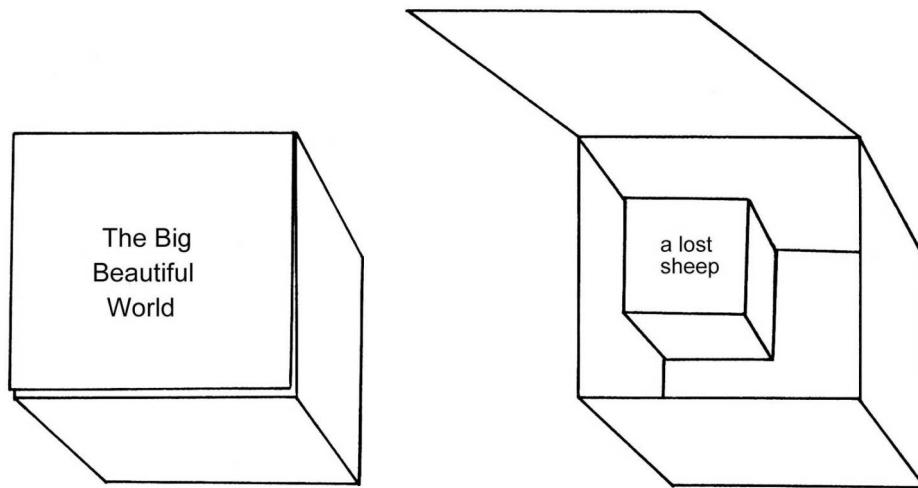


chthonic. The snake on the Egyptian Pharaoh's headdress, the *Uraeus* ("rearing cobra," Egyp.), has a similar meaning. As an earthly symbol of the divine man, it signifies the descent of the cosmic serpent of spirit in matter. Real wisdom requires that man rise above the matter in his mind and gain insight into a noumenal world. The ancients were more skilled in the navigation in the subtler levels of reality, where a continuum of experiences proves that reality and imagination imperceptibly flow into each other. They "learned how to survive in the infinity," as one shaman defined such an experience.

The theme of survival is also reflected in the dove-serpent allegory, which credulity cannot be overtaxed: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Matt. 10:16) If we translate the realistic conceptions of our time into spiritual terms by using them in a figurative sense, the dove-serpent or eagle-snake hybrids of the Occident can stand as parallels to the winged solar dragon of the Orient. The generic mode of thinking links these symbols with the deepest fonts of wisdom, enigmatic and poisonous at the early stages of transmission, but regenerative and healing at the proficient level, restorative as *anima mundi* itself. As if in a backward spelling mystery, the "ave" of a dove reverses the curse of Eva (another spelling of Eve) who was unhappily enchanted by the snake. Not less radical and somewhat allying to our subject is the phonetic correlation found between the name Sophia, meaning "wisdom" ("philosophy," "theosophy," "sophistry" derive from it) and "*aphis*," "serpent" in Greek. That is one of the linguistic observations that speaks in favor of the wise serpent. With the letters reshuffled and resealed, the word can "change its skin," as in this case: the serpent – repents for something that it probably never did, but whatever it did ultimately turned out helpful in the developing the psyche. Aside from linguistics and the metaphoric arts with their mass of reflections, the idea behind all this might strike us with the simple exactness: whatever is produced in the realm of nature may be changed by the spiritual power, which is higher than nature. In everyday terms, sometimes a man does the wrong thing for the right reason.

As to the theme of survival in the age of brute materialism seemingly offering us a cornucopia of riches, comforts,

and opportunities, its interpretation is always in danger of being reduced to a certain level of cynicism about what we are to expect of it in reality. We might be living now in a very different geopolitical world, but our human makeup is still the same as it has been before (if we don't account for the thousands of light-years separating our culture from the antediluvian world). Fortunately, our souls are yet not crushed by the mishaps of genetic engineering. At the instant of our births, we enter our biographical time and projection onto the dangerous curves of our destinies where we play different



R. G., *A Lost Sheep*, 2008

roles. Most of us are spared from the eschatological extremes depicted in the parable of Cain and Abel. Being left alone in the midst of the multitude, one follows the rules of survival spontaneously. In the case of an advanced individual, these rules are dictated not by the uncouth instinct, but by the subtle intuition that helps one to deal safely with the instincts of others. Naturally, understanding how the instinct functions in life becomes a prerequisite for endurance, which explains why alchemical engravings depict an aspirant learning how to navigate a field full of snakes.

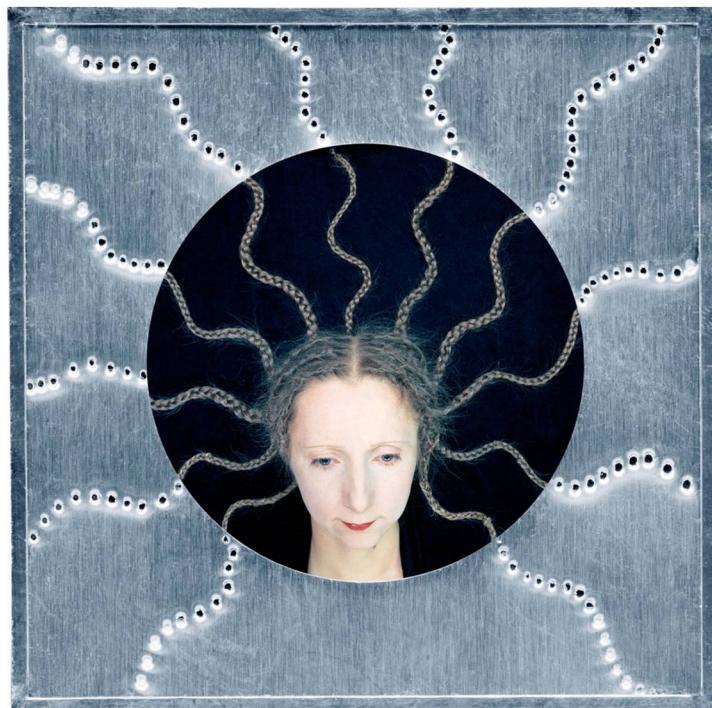
Living in a “brave new world,” we look forward to the

future, but something forces us to look back too: apparently, the true knowledge is hidden in the intuitive mind and its dim memory. In varying degrees of clarity, they retain their original features or, rather, the essence of being, of which nothing need be said – it just is. If we plumb the deepest regions of our folk memories, we might see the familiar objects that make up our world with different eyes, including even seeing the world with the eyes of a snake. Let the Indian legend retold by Ramakrishna (in our rough-cut version) shed some light on this.⁴⁴ After shepherds complained to the wandering sage about the venomous snake living in the meadow, he recited his mantra over it, making it harmless as an earthworm. Instantly, the shepherds caught it and dashed it on the stone. Barely regaining its consciousness and vomiting blood, the poor creature dragged itself into a deep hole. Rarely at night, it came out searching for leaves and fruits for its food, becoming an austere ascetic, a mere skeleton, covered with skin. A year later, when passing the same meadow and finding the ascetic snake in this terrible state, the sage exclaimed: “You are a foolish snake, you do not know how to protect yourself! I forbid you to bite, but not to hiss.” One has to retain some aspects of aggressive nature and know how to hiss at wicked people lest they do you harm. The snake also has to learn how to live among the humans.

To penetrate the symbolism of snakes is like viewing thick layers of a thousand slides pressed together, meanwhile our eyes can distinguish only one at a time. A snake sheds its skin, as if a sock, moves without legs, injects deadly venom and kills, yet does not die from that venom itself; even weirder is that when a snake is killed while pregnant, its dead body goes on hatching young snakes. Like a fish, the snake is lidless: its eyes never close as though they are eyes of some watchful chthonic deity. Perhaps because of all these mysterious qualities, this creature has been mythologized in all cultures. With the gods’ touch, a normal creature can become abnormal and supernormal; this certainly applies to snakes. In mythology, snakes are generally androgynous, whether they are rising as a phallic symbol of the Moon or going in circles as a self-reproductive ouroboros.

The Ancient Greeks believed that departed souls could appear as snakes, symbolizing the immortal parts of the brain and the marrow, thus corresponding to the cerebrospinal line

of the Kundalini that holds the secret of the elixir of life. When Kundalini frees itself from the latent content of the ouroboros, it is also released from the reptilian grip of human libido. That shift affects the transformation of the whole human psyche. For that, one must not be a philosopher, but just know, or perhaps, sense everything at the level of all



Rays © 2005, photo, metal

one's cells, even without knowing. Then, to use figurative language, plunging into the mouth-tail hollow of the metaphorical ouroboros, the soul escapes by a circuitous route. In fact, what we do know about this transition is practically nothing in comparison to what we do not know, being silent about what matters most. It is quite possible that despite confinement in the space-time ouroboros encompassing the mystery of life within its end-negating circle, the human soul

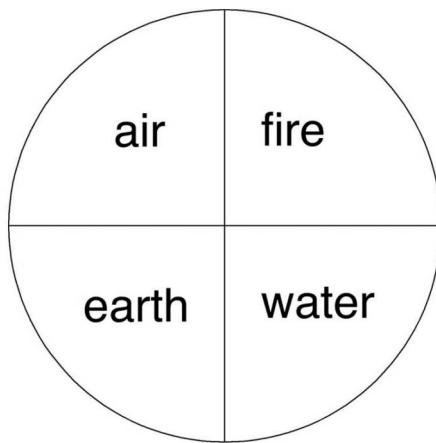
remains unconfined. The soul, called the idea of ideas, is existing at that very moment as well as at every other moment. It always is alive or dead in our understanding. This is the inner reality from which all other realities stem, or else people imagine it for various little transcendental reasons but mainly for the rather practical purpose of keeping their inner lives in order. And the venomous, curled-up, and footless creature is also subject to this order. To conclude the epilogue for the non-ending theme of the ouroboros, we would only add that human knowledge on whatever subject, including this, is perfected in proportion to its openness to its source.

Ouroboros Clock © 2002



4: THE FOUR WINDS

After discussing the general patterns of the ouroboros, we need to look at its components that together make up its whole circle. For the sake of simplicity, our pictorial tale is developed around the conventional four-fold division into the four elements (air, fire, water, earth), emblematically equivalent to the four planes of being.



In many traditions, this quaternary was known as an essential symbol of life organization, interpreted as a genetic code for human *modus vivendi*. In addition to the elemental esoteric properties, one can trace their fourfold influence at both creative and mundane levels; it makes its seal on human characters as well. The cross-sections of the four elements have many levels of interpretation: they symbolize the quaternary seasonal movement of nature, encompass time and space divisions, and they carry the fourfold arrangements according to various abstract properties and symbols (such as the astrological quadrants, the four horsemen of the Revelation, or the four Tarot suits.) They were also mythologized as four rivers of paradise and the quaternary of the evangelists depicted in the four corners of the pictures in the illuminated manuscripts.

There is no need to struggle finding the right words for what can be presented by simple diagrams that show the relationship between seemingly incompatible qualities. The most common of them would be a compass, which means literally “pacing off with equal steps” (from Latin *compassare*).

N
W + E
S

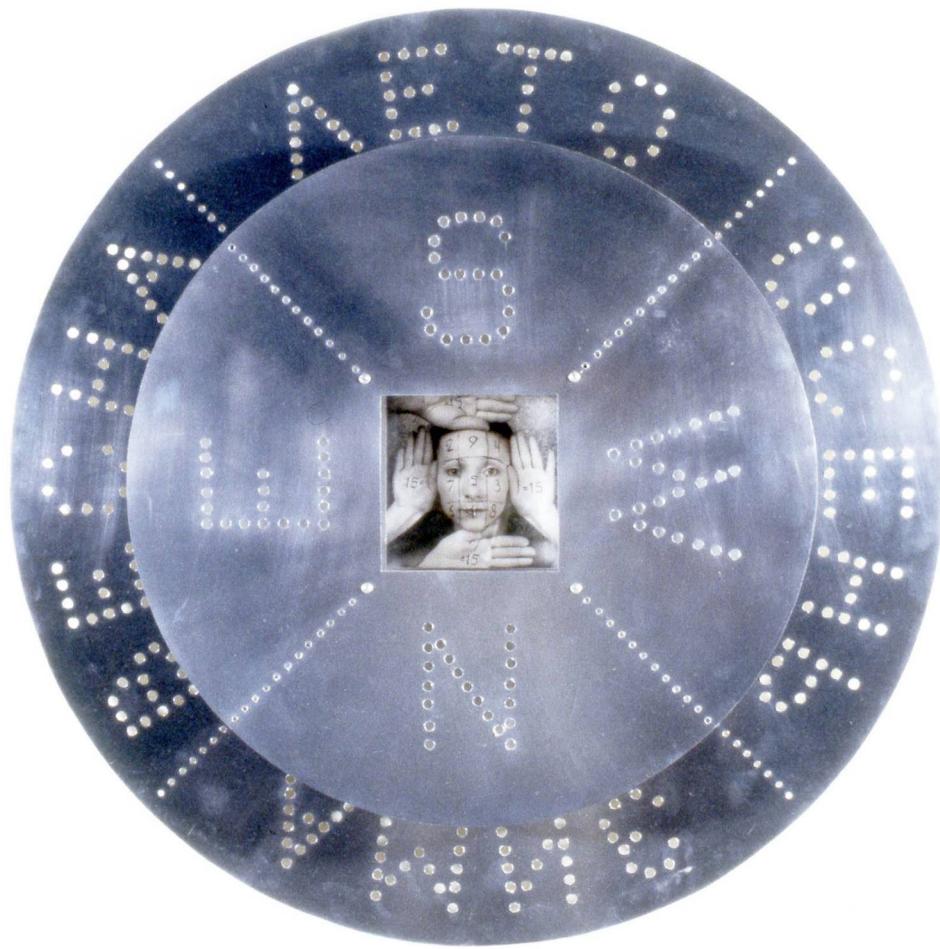
Each reasonable person would be mathematically certain in taking a standard compass for something indispensable and perhaps common to all men. The fact that it is the same everywhere holds true to the point that one cannot predict how things might look from a different perspective. The paradox is that every affirmation that we put forward involves a contradiction, even in regards to such a precise item as a compass. For example, for the Ancient Chinese, the south was on the top, and the north was on the bottom. With the touch of the East added for a subtle difference, Valeriy used that questionable orientation in his relief *Round Magic Square*. Correspondingly, on the circle of the four seasons denominated in Russian, the summer is at the North Pole, and the winter is at the South Pole.

In whatever way we look at the compass, the closest in relationship to it would be the basic orientation of the seasonal currents. From the European point of view, the equation of N and S with the cold winter and warm summer looks like this:

N	WINTER	OLD AGE
W + E =	AUTUMN + SPRING =	MATURITY + CHILDHOOD
S	SUMMER	YOUTH

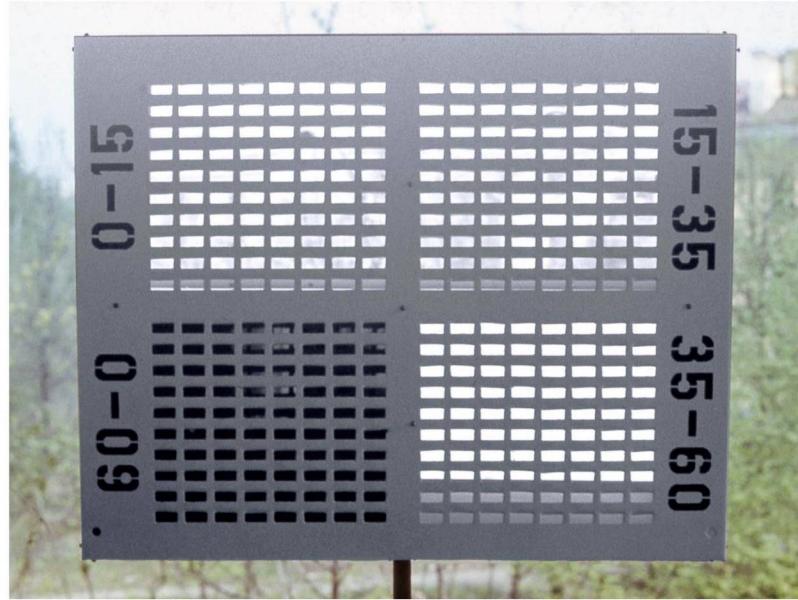
The law of rotation of the elements reflects not only seasonal changes but also the phases in a lifetime that are applicable to all animate and inanimate existing forms since everything is aging on the Earth, even stones. With aging,

man passes through the geometry of all four seasons not only annually but also throughout his whole life. Even if we assume that every event has forking paths of possibilities



V. G., *Round Magic Square*,
1987, aluminum, b/w photo,
61 x 61 x 8 cm

branching in different directions, the four elements steadily correspond to the four periods in a lifespan: air rules light-hearted childhood, fire energizes temperamental youth, water brings tolerance and whenever possible fulfillment (or disappointment) to mature individuals, and earth weighs upon us



V. G., *Age Apparatus*: In section 0-15 the window is empty, in 15-35, it is backed by glass, 35-60 by frosted glass, and 60-0 by mirror, 1974, heavy metal, enamel, 51 x 64 x 21 cm, stand 91 cm. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

in our advanced years. The conceptual example of that can be seen in Valeriy's object *Age Apparatus* that depicts the four-step process of the narrowing vision of the world in proportion to the aging process. In the gradual descent through planes of increasing opacity, one is alerted to the merciless impulses of time. Yet, the mystery of the cross of the four winds has infinitely more secrets than the gloomy inventory of signs of aging.

The fourfold time principle can be found everywhere: a year can be divided into the four seasons, the moon phases with 3-month intervals, or much smaller time units. Each hour can be split into quarters measuring the passage of time on our watches. In music, we perceive the same intervals in sounds, as quarter notes with the time value of 1/4 of a whole note and quarter rests, or pauses. We are surrounded with these partitions on every side, in organic and non-organic

manifestations, in abstract and the most ordinary meaning – from our four limbs and the limbs of quadrupeds to a quarter of a dollar. Measured not only by seasonal and spatial units, the life of a man is also symbolically put on the four-winged cross of time.

We live in a world of time. We all have our yesterdays, and there always will be tomorrows, at least it seems so. The elasticity of time allows us to stretch and shrink it in our minds. If we consider what we are at the exact present moment independent of the past and the future and try to express it diagrammatically, we have not only to skip the transitory counting of years but also to abstract ourselves *to the point of a point*. This is what we tried to envision in the relief *Time Cross*, which central unifying point signifies the instant in which we are beyond counting, where we cannot be anything but what we are. That moment for us is everywhere,

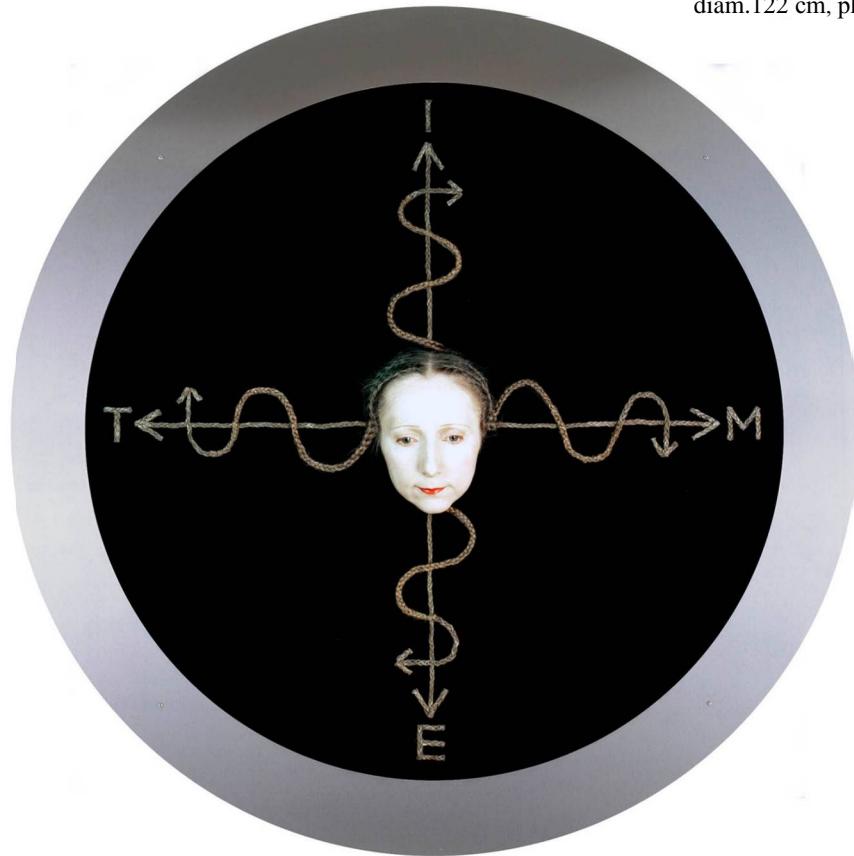
Fire, Air, Water, Earth © 1990



always, and now. With all changes in time, the duration of that “now” is mainly in our consciousness. Ceased from its operation, such numberless face of the clock always shows the correct time.

The oval frame locks *Time Cross* within the circle that in this context might be equated to the ouroboros. In a certain hermetic sense, the ouroboros is the elemental circle. Upon reflection, it appears that the concept of *Time Cross* locked in a circle has something in common with Tantric *Kalachakra*, the wheel of time, which encircles all life while retaining it in the perpetual becoming. The serpentine mind braids the vectors of time with the metaphoric likeness to snakes. With our tenacious attachment to life, we are clinging to time, and so are the snaking braids twisting around the vectors of time.

Time Cross © 1992,
diam. 122 cm, photo, metal



To make the subject still more provocative, we would add that many alchemical drawings feature the crucified snake. Time makes it shed its skin at a certain moment; perhaps, that is what Hamlet meant when he said, “The time is out of joint. O, cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right!” (II. 1.185)

The composition of *Time Cross* and many other works in the series *Photoreliefs* that are featured in metal constructions are based upon the law of symmetry and balance. “God geometrizes,” said Plato, while reflecting it nature equilibrates to it, so we also try to follow the same rules. Music, poetry, art, and many patterns in nature cling to harmony, which in the context of our circular shaped objects is closer to the harmony of spheres understood in Pythagorean meaning. The photorelief *Level* could be a good example of this. Embody-

Level © 1991/2006,
photo, metal, pencil

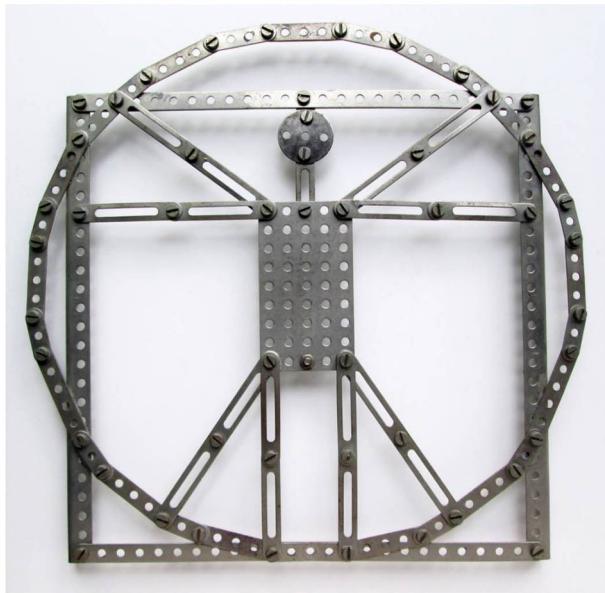


ing the abstract philosophical idea with a “geometrical physicality” that lacks that lively, somewhat carnal sense of classical antiquity, it treats the subject metaphysically: one can ascribe such body only a symbolic value.

Featured within the metal construction with a somewhat centrifugal tendency, the pacing cross-like figure brings the opposing currents into focus and balance. The human body seems to be placed on wheels – “under the wings of the cross and under its arms,” as the Gospel of Philip puts it. (84:30) The body is reduced down to the primary bone constituents, and the human proportions line up with the pivotal palindrome “level,” which meaning is uniquely homological to its visual form. When “placed” on the cross, the word reads the same from all four sides. It is a proportion in itself, thus naturally enhancing the geometrical symmetry of the work.

The central “V” inscribed on top of the skull (incidentally coinciding with the first letter of the artist’s name) is an accepted sign for victory. Perhaps it would be a remotely interesting fact that the logogram VVV was a well-known insignia of the Twenties Roman Legion, one of the legions that the emperor Claudius invaded Britain with in 43 AD. (For those who love precision in translation, VVV is an acronym for “*Vicesima Valeria Victrix*,” the twentieth valiant and victorious.) As the Roman numeral for 5, “V” marks the fifth element, all centralizing quintessence, which is a balancing focal point of the quaternary air, fire, water, and earth. If the ouroboros encircling them consumes itself, the quintessence is reached. In the ether, one is pushed through into the unmanifest for reappearing elsewhere, if we may say so to bypass the religious terminology. When the four-pointed cross turns into the five-pointed star, we get a symbol of a realized man, envisioned as a star in a position with his arms and legs planted apart. These emblematic geometric characteristics of the human body are frequently attributed to the so-called Vitruvian Man, which structural image is explicit or, better to say, literally transparent in the erector set composition *Leonardo’s Man*, alluding to the dilemma of the squaring the circle, among other things.

Returning to the photorelief *Level*, we would like to add that in contrast to *Leonardo’s Man* it rays only in four directions; the fifth one is hypothetical, in the head. According to the mystery of the cross, in its early non-ecclesiastic tradi-



V.G., *Leonardo's Man*, 1975, metal
erector set, 28.5 x 30 x 1.5 cm

tion, the wheel with the cross carries a man into the depths of his low nature where he is transformed and then returns him into the world renewed with perfected vision. We may comment in this regard that the arcane vocabulary adds a seemingly new live sensation to the modern *objet d'art*. Creating his apocryphal story, the seeker, the receptive metamorphosing man, moves through the four elements in search of his own level. He moves on like a rolling stone, with the promise that in due time it will be transformed into the philosopher stone denoting among other things an imperturbable and tranquil union of all opposites. Uniting all vectors in the composition, the crown of the head suggests an image of the pivotal gate through which the supreme force might enter, controlling and stimulating a breakthrough into the veil of matter and enable man to receive the communicating vision of the splendor of the world, perhaps, not of this one. In the iconography of various cultures, people with the especially great power of a spiritual kind were pictured with a nimbus or a halo. The radiance of the crown chakra *Sahasrara*, a symbol of illumination, would be the closest analogy to a halo in the Eastern symbolism.

The rhythm of the composition of *Level* follows architectonic patterns akin to a cross-domed basilica based on the circle and cross-in-square geometrical relationship. The left foot of *Level's* anthropomorphous compass stands on the ground – it is in the dominion of the earth element, sunk in the world of actuality, the ordeal of matter. The right foot is in the air, pacing above. They oppose each other as air and earth, as north and south. The arms keep the horizon of other symbolic pairs – fire and water, east and west. The beam of the arms is a prime force that holds man's body on the surface, as if on the surface of waters. In life, everything is in flux, everything flows like a river. To condense the fluid explanations in the definite proposition, we have to look at the relief *Level* with somewhat symmetrical equanimity. If east and west of that cross-sections encompass man's right-handed and left-handed activity, in a manner of speaking, north and south measure him from head to foot, from what might be defined in him as intellectual and spiritual versus what is earthbound, pedestrian, and materialistic.

Visually, *Level* carries not only compass-like elements with its familiar principles of world navigation, but in a strange way it also reminds us the vision of Ezekiel (1:20), in which the quaternary operates like a wheel within a wheel: "For the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels." Moreover, the cherub (you might say, cherubim) in these wheels has not one but four faces, apparently corresponding to the four elements. The front face is like a man; the right face is like a lion; the left one is like an ox; the back face is like an eagle. Undoubtedly, they have an astrological correlation to the signs of Aquarius, Leo, Taurus, and Scorpio and correspondingly carry the characteristic of the four elements: air, fire, earth, and water that in Ezekiel's wheel within a wheel operate not only as substances but also as categories of sensory experience.

In the ancient cultures of Eurasia, the cross as an axisymmetric living circle (or the rotating swastika) carried the sacred meaning of the foundation and the framework of all constructions in life, including the one associated with spiritual needs. As expected from the framework of any construction, it has to give support or better to say, to bear a heavy load, which at the psychological level would be a load of duty, struggle, and pain. For finding one's own *level* accord-

ing to the concept of this work, it is necessary to develop the skill of carrying the cross of nature on one's shoulders with graceful balance, and while doing it, not identifying oneself either with the burden of the cross or with nature, in serving its blind carnal reasons.



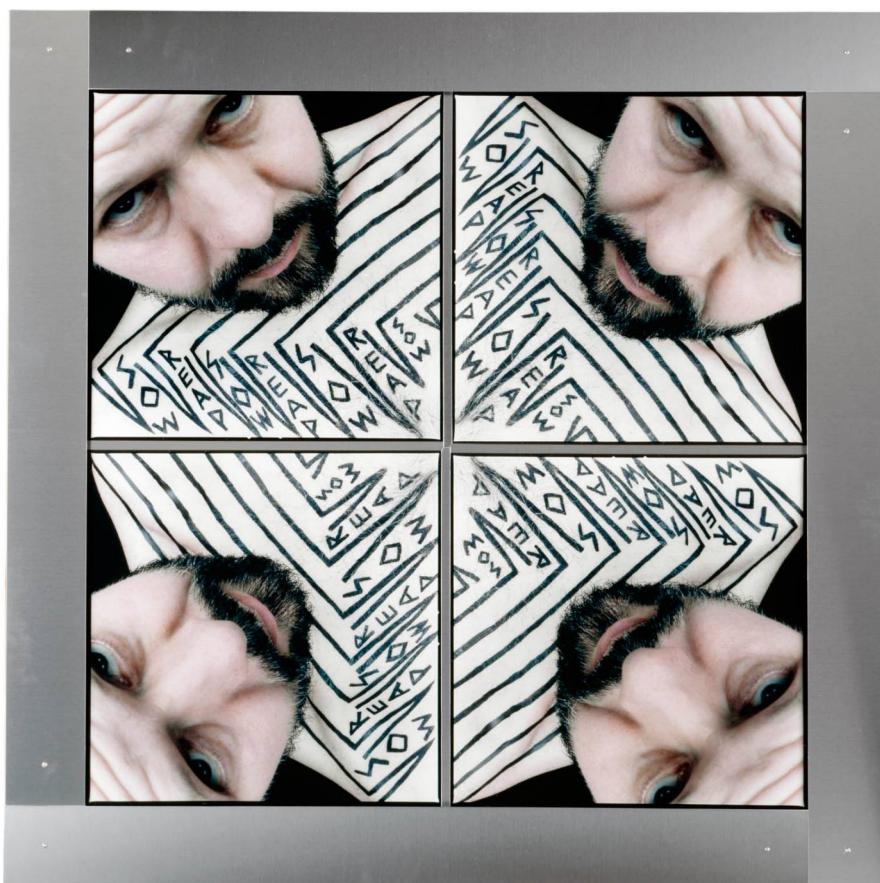
R. G., *Level*, 1988, plywood,
acrylic, 44.5 x 44.5 x 7 cm

The principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum* and its balancing unity is not a synthesis obtained by reason. It seems easier to tap into it by resorting to symbols and art. In the crack where illusion meets reality, art can evoke the past and create the future in a present moment. Thus, the future for the photorelief *Level* was created several years earlier: before assuming an anthropomorphic form in photography, this concept appeared as the three-dimensional visual poem. The wooden relief *Level* consists of three circles, two of which

can be rotated, thus creating a shuffle in its calligraphically symmetric palindrome. It was believed that with the skill in equilibrium, one can find the key to mastering occult science and life in general. The unbalanced forces might be easily dissipated, which that wooden relief harbors as a possibility. Rotating the circles with the letters, one can “dislevel” its symmetrical arrangement into a mess.

The sequence of the four elements taking their course in ordinary life depends on their vectors, rising or falling, but usually combined and rather conflicting. The fractal-generat-

Sow – Reap © 1991, photo,
stainless steel, 122 x 122 cm,
collection of Progressive
Corporation, OH, USA



ing work *Sow – Reap*, discussed earlier as a karmic rotation of the swastika, also implies a perpetual four-folded transmutation of the elements. In the kaleidoscopic wheel, the square roots of the words “sow” and “reap” shoot their fractals into all directions. In a chain reaction, every square root is taken from another – just as, in the tree of life, each branch might alter the course of another. Touch that string, and a destiny instantly changes for better or worse. Behind that semi-algebraic image, one can read the old saying: sow a thought, reap an action, sow an action, reap a habit, sow a habit, reap a character, sow a character, reap a destiny.

In the dynamic interaction, elements transform themselves into other elements, each one co-creates the next, each less subtle than the previous one – that is when the cross rotates downwards, and heaven comes to earth. Rotating the cross in the opposite direction, we get the symbol of earth rising to heaven – that is when each element is absorbed by the next subtler element. This up and down process is not without a paradox open to the strange combination of the pre-destined karmic results and the so-called butterfly effect, when even minor changes may produce significant changes later. In any way, the meaning of the swastika depends on the direction of its rotation defined by its right of left angular ends. In the transition from gross to subtle, each element is inherently connected with the other. Starting from the basest element earth, representing things solid and accessible to all the senses, the upward gradation proceeds to the element water that is liquid, cohesive, and nourishing, then to fire, associated with heat and sight, and, finally, to the invisible air, which vibration we can feel. The four elements can be understood philosophically and as the real sensory qualities of solidity, fluidity, temperature, and mobility. As to the fifth element or ether, it represents that is not of our everyday life and inaccessible to our senses.

MOBILITY

FLUIDITY + TEMPERATURE

SOLIDITY

The Ancient Greek parable of a four-horse chariot depicts the four elements most picturesquely: the air steed is

a movement itself, the fire stallion is almost its equal, the water horse is leisurely slow yet obedient, while the earth mare causes impediment to the entire movement of the chariot. Unintentionally, the classical vision was reflected in our art when the air and fire horses came into a picture. Clearly, the air inspires *Horse Rider*, which snaking mane suggests the wind in her speed and the feeling of really taking a flight. With certain elusiveness, the fire element prevails in *Red Horse* (ill. p. 403) made of rose petals as in a mosaic. The austerity of the rose stems used for the arm and the rapier in combination with the cross (*Rose Croix*) suggests that the rider is a fervent defender of some cause and belief. There are no equestrian images for the other two elements in our resources; the water element usually assumes aphrodisiac forms, while the earth with its terrain and subterranean activity is our ground that can be mapped or extended indefinitely into the black background.

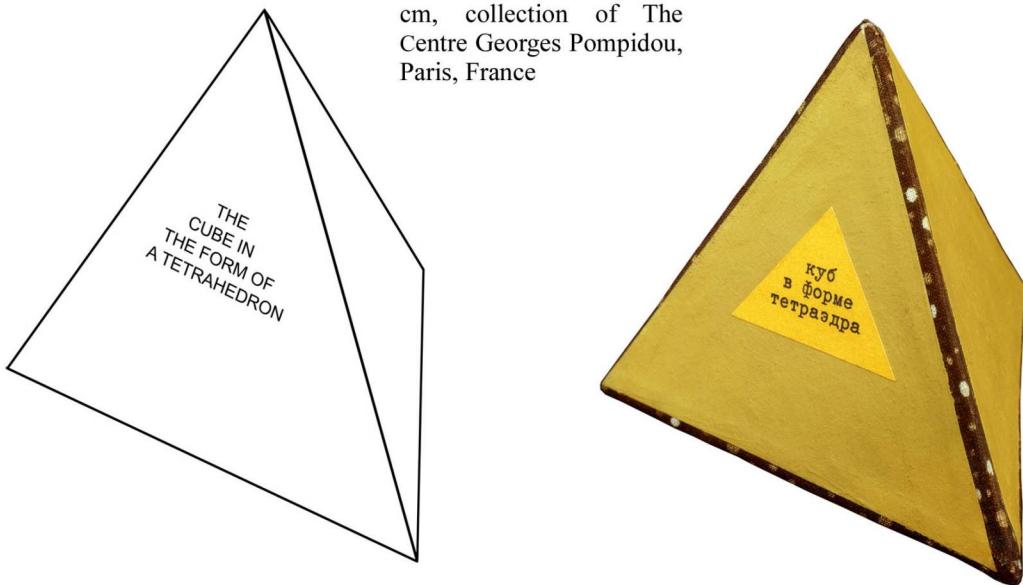
Apparition © 1997



The Ancient Greek maxims were not handed down on tablets of stone, they were born of the same tradition: the apocalyptic horsemen came once the first four of the seven seals were opened. White, red, black, and pale horses symbolize not so much the substance of the elements as they embody the collective experience of suffering magnified by eschatological imaginations that are as catastrophic as possible (conquest, war, famine, and death). This predictive vision is due not only to many destructive phenomena and wars that remain an ongoing threat to humanity but also to various neurotic habits that have deep roots in human nature. For too many people understand self-destruction as an unavoidable misery, for themselves and the world. However, that prognosis remains in many ways obscure, which leads us to the thought that anyone who is in the grip of personal phantasmagorias and catastrophic emotions might be a victim of other people's maya as well.

Everything that is grasped by our natural faculties might be more hypothetical than real because here on earth, the elements of air, fire, water, and earth are all earthly and therefore corruptible, just as our perceptions are. In a slightly ironic form, *The Cube in the Form of a Tetrahedron* addresses that idea in two ways: geometric and elemental. Being in-

R.G., *The Cube in the Form of a Tetrahedron*, 8 x 8 x 8 cm, collection of The Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France



deed a tetrahedron (symbol of the fire element), it declares itself a cube (symbol of the earth), thus questioning the notion of human perception and the closed-circuit ability to monitor life in its true essence.

Rationalizing about noumenon from the perspective of a phenomenon can get us nowhere, hence the idea of earth rising to heaven better be taken parabolically. Anyone realizing the limits of the world in which we move would doubt such an outcome; yet, the allegory that helps us to understand the relationship of things deeper might have a status of metaphysical truth with its high probability of the improbable. Besides, that which is contradictory at one plane of existence might be true at a higher level at which the incongruity is smoothed out. That is what may be expected at the plane of the quintessence.

The classical Greek elements, dated from pre-Socratic times, influenced European thought and culture deeply, their symbolism permeated life throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and later. The Greek five elements were represented with the five platonic solids with 4, 6, 8, 12, and 20 faces, respectively: tetrahedron – fire, cube – earth, octahedron – air, dodecahedron – ether, and icosahedron – water. In Plato's view, God used the dodecahedron, each face of which is shaped in the form of a pentagon, “for arranging the constellation on the whole heaven.” (*Timaeus*, 55) These figures appeared in our art in various forms, not to mention Rimma's cubes that filled out our bookcases with the platonic bodies of three-dimensional visual poetry. In the series *Perhappiness*, we recombined all elements in an ongoing experiment in aesthetics: these solids were carved from apples and inlaid from grapes as a mosaic, they took elusive transparent shapes, alluding to philosophic ideas and mythological patterns, or adopted an ironic tone of fortune-cookie mysticism. The fictional, if not fictitious, yet logically acceptable interpretation of these geometrical figures became the hallmark of the later series *Flat Solids*.

The cycle of works *Flat Solids* is based on optical illusions; although at first glance the works look like three-dimensional objects, they belong to the same “flatland” of photography: their metal geometrical constructions are actually two-dimensional. For example, in the composition *H₂O* featuring pseudo-water in a pseudo-cube, the whirlpool

of the “great deep” created out of hair is placed or rather “incubated” in a flat solid. The waterfall of hair increases the illusion of the flat composition that appears as a cube. Here the water element or *aqua vitae*, associated with the active life, and human life, in particular, circulates within the earth element. From the perspective of *Flat Solids*, the water/earth



H₂O © 1990 – 94, photos,
stainless steel, 122 x 122 cm

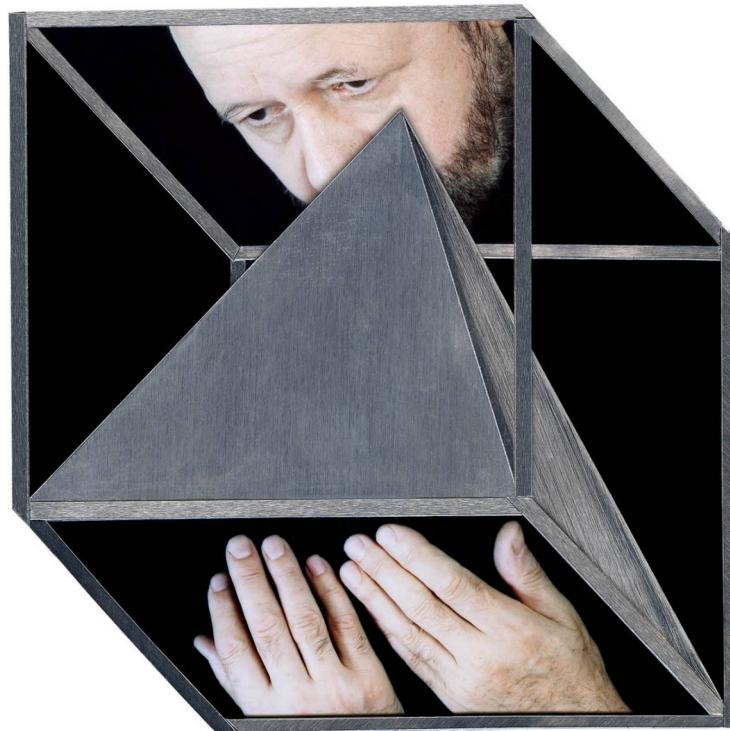
bond is somewhat equal to the circle/square correlation, hence the *H₂O* image depicts, speaking hermetically, how the earth element is squaring the circle of water.

In the photorelief *Pyramid in Cube*, the fire element (the pyramid) is enclosed in the earth element (the cube), you might say, buried in the earth; both figures are in a man's hands. The dynamic paradigm of the ascending and descend-

ing energies, designated by the triangular tetrakty and the pyramid, is subjected to the law of gravity, inherent in the earth element, at least until the mystery of the pyramid is solved. The study of proportions and geometrical forms gave intellectual food to ancient thought, for the power of regeneration (associated with the creative paradigm) that can be part of our reality can be intuited through the structures and forms of nature.

One more ambivalent Pandora's box is "concealed" in the photorelief *Dust*, in which "us," written on the forehead in red letters, seemingly glows among the ashes as if working as a catalyst for this "polymerous" concept of death. It may be noted, in passing, that originally Pandora had not a box containing fatal troubles but a jar with winged souls, the type of jar used as an urn for storing the ashes of cremated persons. The dust symbolizing mortal atmosphere in the earth

Pyramid in Cube ©
2008, photos, metal



cube is a chaotic mixing of all four dissipated elements; in that sense, it is a polar opposite of the quintessence that binds them together. Who knows how much the two opposites are related, perhaps like sad tears and happy tears, black holes and white holes, emptiness and fullness? In the realm of theory, absence is always present, at least hypothetically. In the square package of diffused particles, dust is a theoretically suspicious combination of shape and shapelessness, thus reminding us that dust is also a cosmic material, and cosmos in Greek means “order.”

The theory of the elements has its roots in Ancient Greek metaphysics, but it does not mean that they are not known elsewhere; in Chinese *I Ching*, for example, the five elements play a significant role, but they are known under somewhat different names (wood, metal, fire, water, earth). In Hinduism, the four elements relate to the four states of

Dust © 1990-91, photos,
stainless steel, 122 x 122 cm



matter, while the fifth *akasha* (ether) is beyond the material world, and that very *akasha* was used for the creating of the other four elements. A similar list exists in Buddhism; in Bön, the ancient Tibetan religion, the elements are perceived as prana or vital energy. As to the alchemists whose visual theories were encouraged (and warped) by their hypnotic imagination and sexual fantasies, they described the properties of the elements in a rather fanciful way. They reduced their number to three and renamed them sulfur, mercury, and salt. Thus, these three elements were products of the intermingling of the four elements with the ether structure, while qualitatively sulfur would be an approximate combination of fire and air, mercury of air and water, and salt of earth and water.

Returning to the classical four elements and their four corners to which the four winds blow, we will attempt to compare what in them comes from the grace of nature to mere mechanical effects. Generally, Empedocles is credited with discovering the four elements that, in his terminology, are four roots and are somewhat equal to deities possessing various qualities, including love and hate, while in Jungian psychology, the elements are similar to the archetypes. Broadly speaking, the elements are both qualities and powers, manifesting in many ways: as pure material substances, as psychological phenomena, and in their most refined version, as operating in a spiritual mode. In their everyday meaning expressed graphically, the elements can be observed as:

AIR	SKY	GAS
WATER + FIRE	SEA + SUN	LIQUID + PLASMA
EARTH	LAND	SOLID MATTER

There is no need to go into Aristotelian explanations of the elements with their dry, moist, cool, and cold properties; for that one can always refer to the original sources. The elements are so rich in symbolism that it is practically impossible to unveil their meaning in such a short introduction. They penetrate every single cell of our life's organization and entirely rule the living creatures that follow only their instincts. The elements spread in the direct and indirect in-



Fire, Water, Earth © 1991,
photo, metal

flow, taking the “form” of a mass of reflections, more significant for being common to large groups of people and manifesting as a collective unconscious state. As the constituents of every physical, sensual, mental, and spiritual phenomena, the elements represent the four fields of experience which possibilities and qualities decline with the increase of their densities. Metaphorically that can be contemplated in this arrangement:

MEN

PLANTS + ANIMALS

MINERALS

In their psychological garb, the elements can be traced in four different characters: an airy mentally quick sanguine personality, a fiery creative choleric, a watery sensitive phlegmatic, and an earthly reliable but ponderous melancholic.

SANGUNIC

PHLEGMATIC + CHOLERIC

MELANCHOLIC

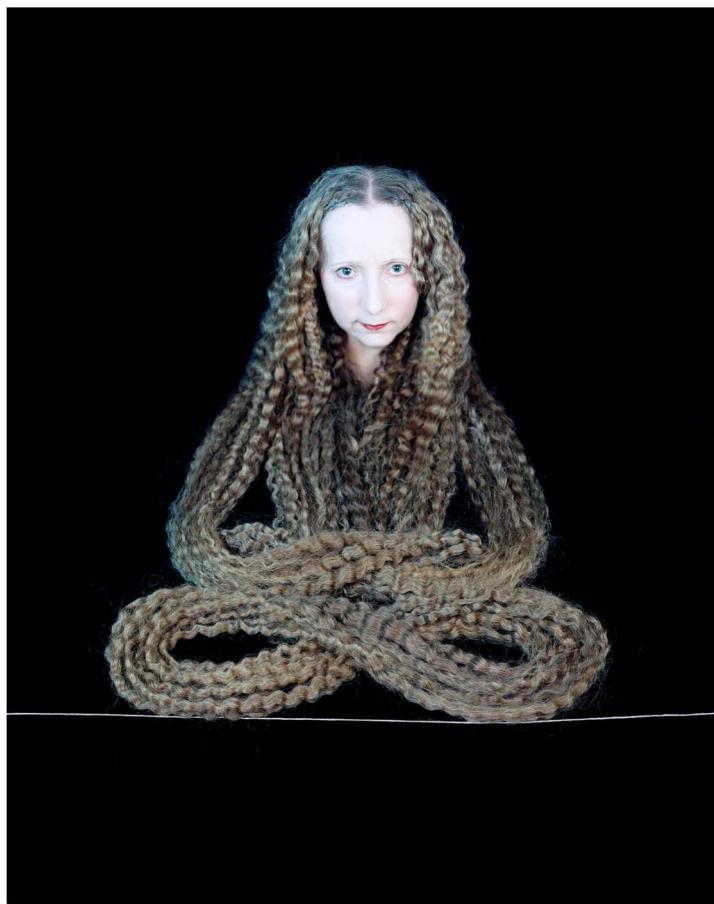
It goes without saying that the human persona is never that simple and as clear-cut it might look. And what would be the main character flaw, if every man has at least ten of them? A natural man is like an actor, *mutatis mutandis*; even being a reasonably rational creature with common neurotic symptoms, he absorbs his passions from nature and social atmosphere like blotting paper. Different psychological as well as physical factors force themselves upon his nervous system, and not without some difficulty, man tries to reconcile his desires with the providential activity of nature. Nevertheless, neither internal nor external traps arrest the spontaneity of his reaction. It is difficult to accept the idea of oneself as a stereotype especially when one is young – but in old age, one might. When you examine your past and the past of others, all might look repeatedly paradigmatic, at least to some degree. The four winds with their elemental vortices blow down the pathways of our lives until the last mile has been traveled, when we all arrive at the same final point by different routes.

Our vital energy can make us look less (or more) than our age has ebbed because our psychology and health are integrally connected. That's probably why Hippocrates applied the elements for medical purposes, associating them with the human humors: black bile (earth), phlegm (water), yellow bile (fire), and blood (air). A tenacious neurosis may stem from the havoc of misbalanced elemental forces. Even the modern belief is not at all contradictory to the fact that most diseases are psychological in origin however external symptoms may manifest. Illness is an experience to which all beings are subjected to in this world. In the trans-scientific system of Ayurveda, which is a part of the Vedic teaching, health is based on the correct balance of three *doshas*,

composed of the five elements: *vata* (air and ether), *pitta* (fire), and *kapha* (earth and water). Originally the healer was equated with the teacher of the spiritual law, while the transformative process of healing was based on overcoming the interior poisons (anger, lust, and various delusions) that must be rooted out in a detached, dispassionate way. The *doshas* characterize temperaments, tastes, body types, illnesses, and thinking styles that altogether constitute a character and its sensual experience, thus giving a psychological makeup to very different types: from refined intellectuals to Bushmen.

Naturally, the elements might be traced behind the prop-

Yogi © 2006



erties of the gunas introduced by Samkhya philosophy and yoga. The three *gunas* (strings, in Sanskrit) represent the essential aspects of all nature: *sattva* (goodness, purity, lightness, wisdom), *rajas* (activity, fiery passion, covetousness), and *tamas* (passivity, ignorance, inertia, darkness). *Tamas* does not rise above the five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing to which the classical five elements are connected. When the fiery and turbid *rajas* penetrates the inert obscure *tamas*, the latter begins to acquire blind emotional impulses. Along with pangs of painful movement, the sense perceptions begin to blend with feelings that intensify and grow into the passions of *rajas*. When in its turn the *rajasic* life of emotions reaches its consummation and passions expire, giving birth to the peaceful condition, one can gradually reach the luminous *sattvic* state. This is a concise development paradigm showing how a merely sensual animal-like life escalates into the passionate life first of an anti-hero, then a hero himself whose consciousness holds the potential for rising to the state of the unbroken tranquility of the spiritual life of rishis and sages. When *sattva* penetrates all three *gunas* in the divine reunion of the sensual, emotional, and ideal, that state is defined by the notion of *satchidananda*, meaning conscious blissful existence (*sat* – existence, *chit* – consciousness, *ananda* – bliss). Despite the different terminology, there are grounds for identical hopes and purposes in the East and in the West, where the platonic ideas, mystic Christianity, and various philosophic systems also aimed to develop man's ability to receive spiritual inflow from the great uncompromising absolute. But the spiritual impulse is hard to pin down, especially now, when for most people, it is no more than a glorious metaphor for religion. That might be explained by the fact that the spiritual growth of many newly civilized people ends with childhood.

If the majority of people can keep reality in the forefront of their minds and refer to it with grim constancy, there have been and always will be those idealists obsessed with spirit and other woolly notions. For instance, the elementals “intuited” by Paracelsus, the fifteenth-century Swiss physician and alchemist, extended the meaning of the classical elements into the fairy realm, representing them with four incorporeal spirits with holy and unholy dispositions: sylphs, salamanders, undines, and gnomes. Composed of vortices of



Egg on a Blade of Grass © 2002

vortices of subtle matter, these mythical beings survived thanks to many folklore tales and fairly well integrated themselves into the alchemy.

AIR	SYLPHS
WATER + FIRE	= UNDINES + SALAMANDERS
EARTH	GNOMES

In their company one would find oneself lifted to the sphere of nimble and mercurial conceptions. In addition to their elemental properties, they are interesting figments of the ego in its psycho-behavioral aspects: thus, the airy sylphs – sublime, invisible, and light beings – are very beautiful, intellectual, and rather arrogant, while the fiery salamanders are powerful, volatile, erotic, and dangerously aggressive. The

watery undines are like the sensual, dreamy, and enchanting mermaids, while the small earthly gnomes are laborious, stubborn, and stingy. There are endless stories about their deeds and misdeeds. Things might be interesting because they are inexplicable; moreover, one can believe in them precisely because they are absurd (*credo quia absurdum*), as it happened in the case of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The creator of the most famous detective of all time in full trust accepted the images of the fairies, allegedly photographed by two mischievous girls, as an evidence of psychic phenomena.

Thinking of the prime patterns of life, we would empha-

On the Wings © 2002



size the abyss between divinity and humanity that is filled with the archetypes expressing various properties of the elements. The symbols of the angelic powers are extensively employed in mystical Christianity, Kabala, magic, and other related practices. The quartets of the angels and the evangelists featured with astrological symbolism in the medieval illuminated manuscripts suggest further reading of the elements within biblical connotations. For instance, the authors of the Gospels are often drawn holding books in the cardinal signs of the Zodiac (Aries, Cancer, Libra, and Capricorn).

RAPHAEL	LUKE	MAN
GABRIEL + MICHAEL	=	JOHN + MARK = SNAKE/EAGLE + LION
AURIEL	MATTHEW	OX

It would be interesting to look at some unusual interpretations of these correlations, hardly encompassed by the traditional criteria. Following some of the alchemists' ideas, namely, Maria Prophetess, C.G. Jung suggested making the Holy Trinity a quaternary by adding to it "for a balance" the principle of the matter, i.e., the salt, impersonated by Lucifer, whom he regarded as "the spirit of reconciliation and integration." Considering the fact that in recent times people began to feel at home with low moral standards, such candidate for membership in the Holy Trinity would help humanity to grow into the state of its hereditary evil much quicker. As a refined gentleman, Jung did not assess his initiative as unquestionably right, rather merely right from his point of view; at the same time, he was always loyal to his natural habit of adding some practical matter to the unpractical, in his opinion, spirit. For, otherwise, it will lead us only to inflation.⁴⁵ There is no need to argue with this. It would make a great deal more sense to bring to our eyes more equilibrium and leave it to speak for itself.

SPIRIT
MIND + SOUL
BODY

The four elements of the creation can be abstracted to the homogenous primordial forces of light and life as the coun-

terparts of spirit and matter. In *Greek Formula*, that idea is transmitted through the cruciform monogram of “light” and “life” (*phos* as in “photos” and *zoe* as in “zoo”). The geometrical formation of the two Greek words is not a merely visual metaphor. Regarding the Greek Logos, this formula signifies the descent of the creative impulse of light into life-forming matter. Upon entering life, light becomes the world. In spite of its archaic lineage, the *Greek Formula* is not only



Greek Formula © 1990,
Light and Life

a sublime idea or a pure abstraction; it is a living symbol not less accurate now than it was before. Since the work was already discussed at length in Book 1: *Be-lie-ve*, ch. 4, we leave it at that and say nothing more.

Everything is clothed in whatever element in nature that enables it to serve a useful purpose. The four elements con-

stantly interlace, creating the forms of life and the forces that support it and simultaneously oppose it. All things flow in perpetual becoming and struggle. Contradiction is the test of necessity: tearing our life apart, it turns it into a dynamic cross. You might say that the elemental forces ray and x-ray in different directions; they are cross-supported by their balance that leans one way or another, or all four ways at once.



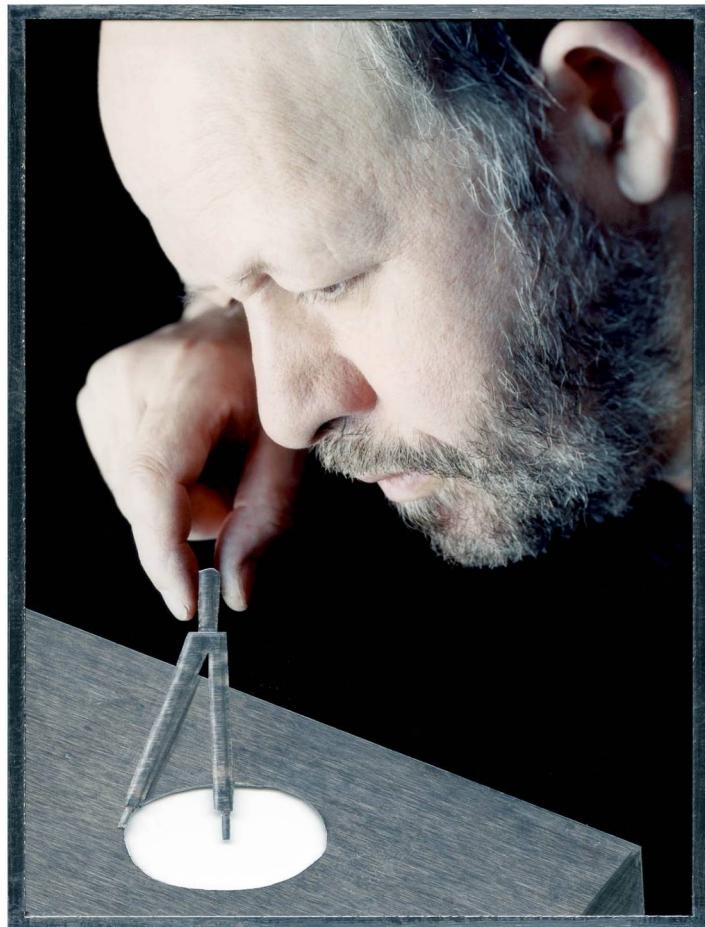
Similar to chemical elements, the classical elements can transform into each other, they can neutralize and even annihilate each other. In simple words, fire dries water, water extinguishes fire, water evaporates into air, air precipitates into water, and so on. Whenever we have two opposed elements acting upon each other, they might not only eclipse each other but also consume and do violence to each other. Even though the elements come from one source in their essence, they might struggle like the blind striving energy of nature that turns against itself. To illustrate that paradigm, we will borrow the macabre metaphor from Arthur Schopenhauer, who compared the process of individuation to the violent postmortem state of the bulldog-ant of Australia: if you cut the ant in half its head and tail fight each other until the end. And as for the head and tail struggle, there is a strange parallel to the self-consuming principle of the ouroboros.

As soon as interlacing elemental energies and forms of life emerge out of the formless and undifferentiated essence of all things, they tend to express themselves in both the conflict and union of opposites, veiling their strong propensity to form a higher unity. The proper unification of the four is the ultimate

S E C
R E T

secret of the quintessence, which energy (E) maintains the balance in simultaneous existence of incompatible things. (Note: The unifying grasp of contradictory ideas can stimulate detachment, but until the decisive crisis takes place, the question of either-or would hover in the air.) This fierce and vital thing called life draws everyone like a magnet, and offering its frights, frustrations, and storms, it placates them by many satisfactions. How is a man to get rid of his attachment to them? By letting all his passions and struggles go? By something contradictory, perhaps, playing with them like on a chessboard alternating with black and white squares, or accepting the harder challenge proposed in the scriptures – “Love your enemies!”⁴⁶ If each is the other’s opposite and compliment, as with the elements of different density and vibrations, the balance and harmony of seemingly contradicting and divergent components is born from their interrelations, as if one sees the whole of everything at once. It would be safer to combine these intuitions with the rational methods and refer to the well-known, perhaps, a little overconfident assertion of Archimedes, “Give me a lever and the place to stand, and I will move the earth!” Hypothetically speaking, the point of leverage is the center of the elemental cross, the intersection of all forces of the world.

Returning to the image *Level* (p. 203) embodying that concept in a human form, let’s project the Archimedes’ point onto this anthropomorphic cross, shifting the point of reference from the terrestrial territory to the realm of human consciousness. At that point, the body must be in full balance, and the conscious essence can “move the earth,” lifting up and shifting itself to a higher plane of existence, if not another dimension. This transition is dramatized by the solitary mystery of the cross. In esoteric tradition, Jesus was put on the cross of the four elements. (Perhaps every artist’s crucifixion – painted, sculptured, or photographed – is a self-portrait, whether he is aware of it or not.) The consciousness loses its bodily representation in time and space, at least in this time and space as we know it in the material plane. As to the struggle of the forces within and without, that might be explained and perhaps justified by a convenient generalization: if the contradictory ideas oppose each other on one plane of existence, their contradictions can be smoothed out on a higher level.



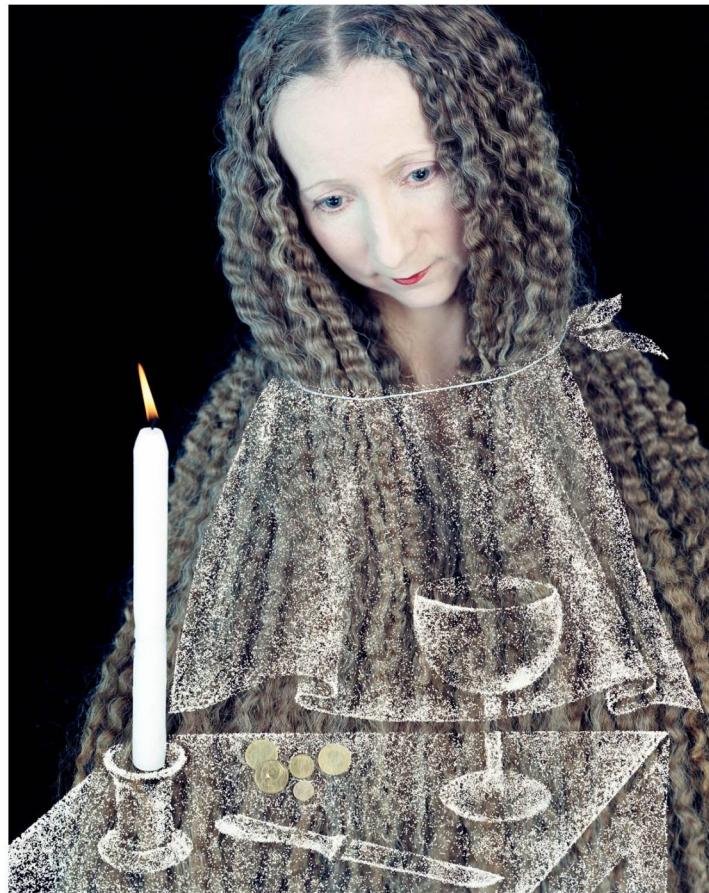
Compass © 2005,
photo, metal

Each concept of our visual sutra contributes to the whole, developing the essential ideas through manifold aspects; all suiting their corresponding levels of consciousness that fabricates its projections in the art forms. Tentatively, they can be linked to the notion of the four elements that had a special meaning in antiquity. The mastering of each element is akin to “baptism” not only by water but also by fire, air, and earth. That quaternary operates like a revolving door, admitting men into another dimension of consciousness – one by one, or perhaps two by two, as in the alchemical understanding.

The figurative interpretation of the four elements clearly reflects the difficulties inherent in all great undertakings. Many mythological patterns bear the residue of a fourfold phase, in which the process of building up and breaking down is accompanied by anxiety and disagreement of cross-opposites.

Now, looking at the mystical and alchemical aspects of the four elements, we might be amazed at the roles, both tragic and fortunate, that they were playing in earlier times. Their impact on human actions and thinking was more immediate than it is described in most modern unoriginal interpretations of the elements. The four Tarot suits, which signifi-

Four Elements © 2005



cance extends much further than a card game or a divination kit, depict the prime elements as four devices. Their outlines can be traced in the sacred objects of the Arthurian legends, developing around the mysteries of the Holy Grail. Much of this was connected with the concealed history of the Order of the Knights Templars, who borrowed part of their veiled symbolism from the Near East.

AIR	SWORDS
WATER + FIRE = CUPS + WANDS	
EARTH	COINS

In less general terms, there were four miraculous devices correlated to the elemental essences necessary to master the spiritual quest, namely, the wands, cups, swords, and coins. The wands (spears or clubs) were associated with the lance of Longinus that pierced the heart of Jesus – they are the symbol of the West. The cups or the hearts, the symbol of the rising East, were linked to the Holy Grail containing the blood of the Savior. The broken sword (spade) that was given to Parsifal as a token of separation and discrimination of the intellect represents the North; while the coins (diamonds or pentacles) belong to the riches of the South. The philosopher stone, the one and only diamond of life worth seeking, was associated with the quintessence, denoted by a pentacle (star). The Arthurian pilgrimage to the Grail became the epitome of the progressing of consciousness through the four emblematic essences wrapped around the cross. The quest itself already stirs up the opposing qualities of the quaternary, which are reflected in the personality of the hero who undertakes that quest and directs all his confrontations, as within, so without. They rise as thinking vs. feeling, idealism vs. materialism, as something vs. nothing and everything.

INTUITION
FEELING + THINKING
SENSATION

The philosophical *Ecce Homo* analog to that quaternion might be inferred from Friedrich Nietzsche's admission: "When I speak of Plato, Pascal, Spinoza, and Goethe, then I

know their blood rolls in mine.”⁴⁷ His fourfold “blood test” seems to exhibit a similar elemental relationship seen within the philosophical context and a surprisingly international team of its constituents (so much for Nietzsche’s alleged nationalism).

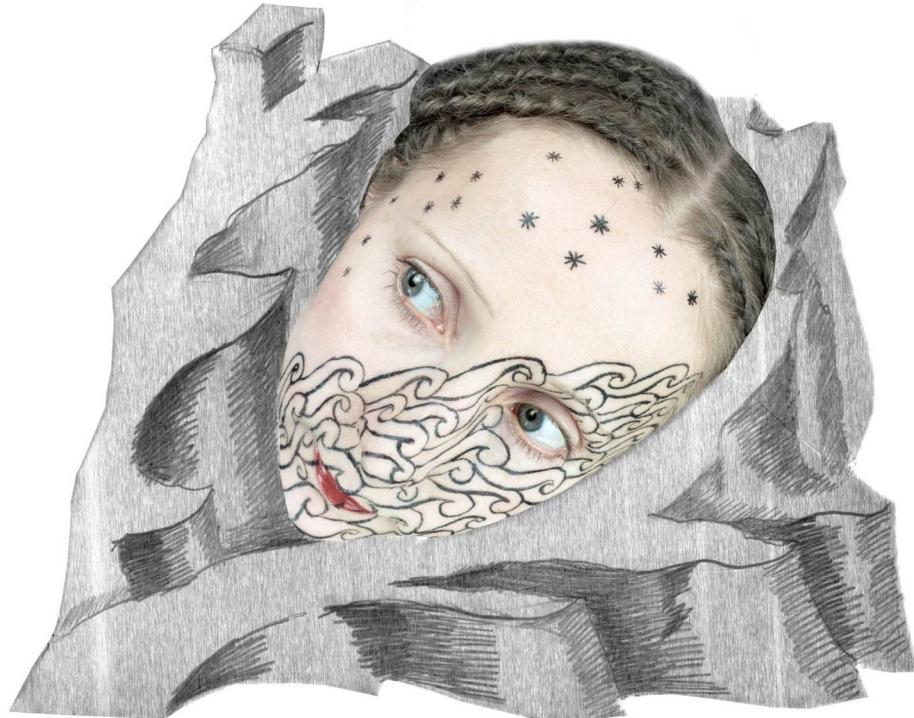
PLATO

SPINOZA + PASCAL

GOETHE

Fully admitting that these thinkers belong to the race of wisdom-lovers, we still have to objectify their cross-linkage that may seem a little bizarre. To identify air, fire, water, and earth elements in them, we have to accentuate the transpersonal pitch of each philosopher, possibly, in one or two words. Then the august quaternary might be seen as follows: a Greek idealist, a Frenchman of a flaming mentality, a Portu-

Sky, Sea, and Rocks © 1991,
photo, metal, pencil



guese Jew with the habits of a Christian holy man, and a German, sharing his carnal mysticism with doctor Faust. It always puzzled us that the spelling of Goethe's name is very close to the spelling of "goethia" (from Greek for "sorcery"), as it is in the *goetia* magic, the magic of a theurgic and chthonic kind, revised and popularized by Aleister Crowley. An interesting correlation is that in Avestan, *gaethia* means "material world," from which Gaia or Gaea, the name of the Greek goddess of earth, was derived from. Contemplating the incomprehensible, we try to express it by analogy; and each of us can decide for oneself "whether it is best to be on the side of the unconditionally mistrustful or of the uncondition-

Alchemical Workshop © 2004



ally trusting,” to end the “blood analysis” of Nietzsche with his own words.⁴⁸

Adding all influences up to find a total, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “My hand has gone back and forth, mingling fire with spirit, joy with sorrow, and the hardest with the soft-

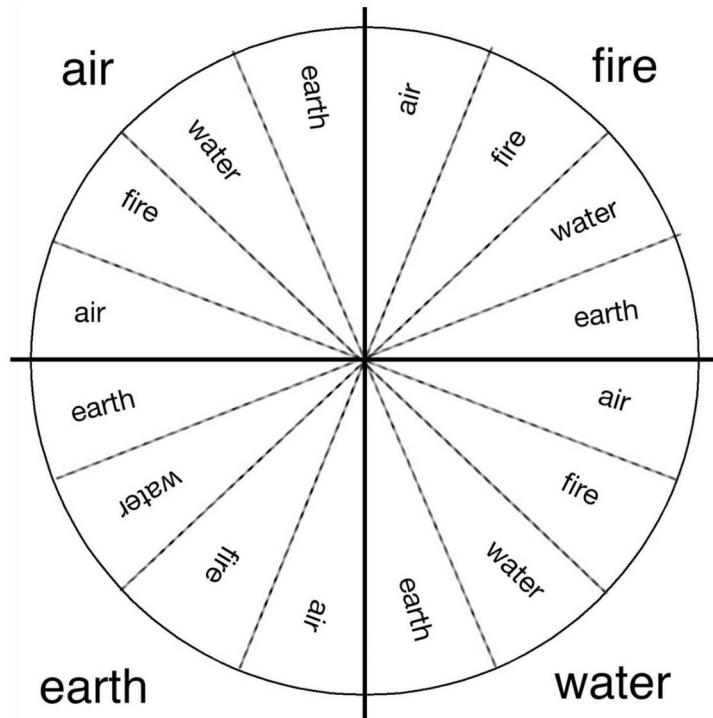


Compass © 1989

est. I have become a grain of the saving, salt which makes everything in the bowl mix well.”⁴⁹ Moving from facts to fiction, we are tempted to compare our Nietzschean mixing bowl to an amazing account for the same elements, the creation of what we call “the Eastern mind.” The Brahmin Tarakee, the model of austere devotion, was known to live 1,100 years (though history does not encourage such hopes). To conquer the four beasts of air, fire, water, and earth, one century he lived wholly on air, another was continuously

enveloped by fire, the next century he lived wholly on water, and for yet another century, he was buried up to the neck in earth.⁵⁰ The elements as a means for the training of the soul can follow each other sequentially, but not necessarily; through suffering, they heal the wounds which they have inflicted. The similar symbolism can be found in the Apocalyptic horses, unleashed one by one.

It is impossible to define the primeval elements: we can comprehend only mental constructions, emotions, and things composed of them. Having the center of “gravity” at every moment, their unity or their oneness maintains a repetitive arrangement, i.e., the four elements are repeated in each other; and that fractal sub-elemental gradation goes to infinity. It is as if, branching off the main street, many small, almost secret lanes spread out in all directions. To give a more explicit example, the fourfold roots of the air element are the following: purely airy air, fiery air, watery air, and air contaminated with earth. Each small section can be subdivided the same way, and that is *ad infinitum*. Thus, all ele-



ments are interrelated and certain plasticity sets in, so it is difficult to identify the exact essence of each element.

Sometimes we have an impression that classifying the elements is like “taking the rainbow to pieces,” so much they are interlaced, both in theory and in practice. There are many examples of the unification of different genetic materials in nature, sometimes not without a chimerical touch (as in the case of an echidna that breastfeeds its young as a mammal but lays eggs like a bird). The whole range of existence can be seen as one substance created from the elements manifesting in physical, mental, or subtle forms, which are basically the same in their essence, except that they have different densities and different vibrations. That might reflect our state of mind more than it is fair to analyze, but we perceive the elements as crossing each other, overlapping, pairing, and coinciding: their contrasts may rise in tumult or relapse into a lull, while their turnaround might be smooth or sudden and violent. To attain something fresh and vital by using a conceptual combination of metaphors, we shall interpret the elements visually, one by one, trying to match our undercurrent thoughts to our images.

5: AIR IN EARTH

Each element has a vast range of manifestations in life, from positive to negative. For example, the air in its highest and lowest abstract forms of manifestation appears, theologically speaking, as holy and unholy spirits; by analogy it might be presented as a case of levitation vs. gravitation, or linked to various metaphors, such as the blue sky on a sunny day and fata morgana in the twilight zone. Air can be fresh or stale; it is without beginning or end. In the idealistic classical view, it is often associated with invisible and incorporeal *pneuma*; but if we focus on the conventional sense for practical things in a mediocre and shabby life, it would be merely questions of ventilation and air conditioning, strictly products of our age.

Aside from the gradation range that rules evolution and involution within each element, they are always misread to some degree and therefore presents another set of either-or

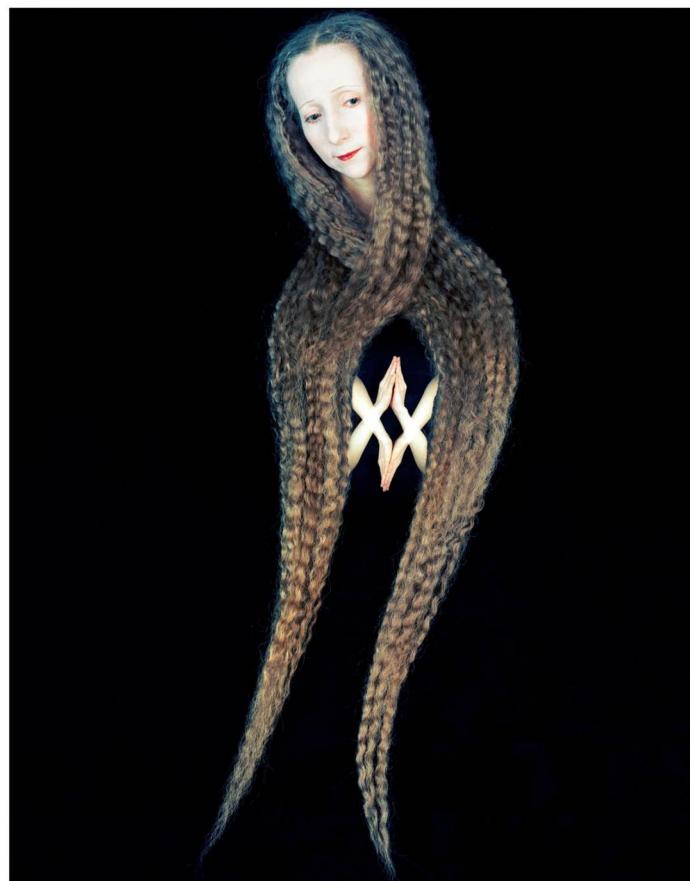
Levitation © 1994, photo, metal



contrasts. Air can arouse the eager desire for the highest level of perfection – and not fulfill it. Imaginary perfection is never equal to its physical counterpart, meaning that you cannot reach heaven through the air, neither by an airplane nor by a rocket. However, for some mystics, the harmonious world of ideas might be more real than the so-called real world.

Air is incorporeal; it fills the atmosphere like “a painting that arises in the sky without any painter and without paint” according to the Eastern parables. We breathe air in; it fills us with freshness. In the vast area of shimmering air, which is called the sky, there is always something elevating and ennobling, the best and the most – the sky is the limit. And the

Diamond Gates © 2000





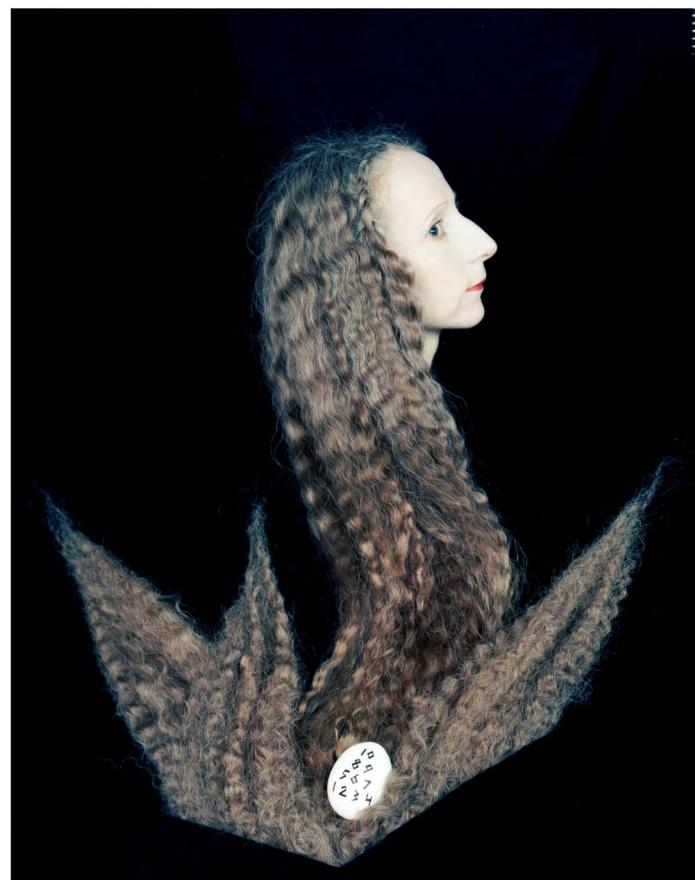
On the Branch © 1997

birds, we must not forget the birds in the sky, where they are in their element. There are legends in the Levant about the birds of paradise that have no feet, for they only soar in the air and feed on the ether. Many metaphors are associated with birds in the sky, take for example the magic flights that belong not only to a shamanic household but also suggest blue-sky thinking which, in more sober words, would mean a thought process engaged in searching for new ideas or, God forbid, bipolar disorder termed flight of ideas. Given the mental context, the world can be made of one's own thoughts flying apart. In any case, it is better to stick to a somewhat more optimistic interpretation of bird-related metaphors and free-

range thinking. Intelligence has wings, leaping out with wonderful lightness it is capable of darting straight up. It is the swiftest of all birds. To avoid an interpretation that is too nebulous, we would illustrate the idealist, literally platonic aspect of the air with the dream of Socrates, in which he saw a signet sitting on his knees. Soon enough, the bird grew plumage, became a swan, and flew off, letting out a loud, sweet cry. The next day young Plato was introduced to Socrates who immediately recognized him as the swan in his dream.⁵¹

Playing with the mythological attributes of Mercury, including his winged sandals, we made his image partly in-

Pythagorean Egg © 1998





Wings of Mercury © 1997

corporeal. With energy held under effortless control, the young god is known as a symbol of one's mobility in the air. He moves with an enchanting lightness, soaring to remote heights that are inaccessible and almost alien to us humans. Air passing by his face; his hair spread in several locks is a waving mane in the wind. To justify the appearance of the he-god in she-form, we have to turn to his alchemical image, which is a hybrid of masculine spirit and feminine soul with the traits of both Hermes and Aphrodite (a.k.a. Mercury and Venus); that is why the alchemists consider him hermaphroditic. He is a twin, Adam and Eve, old and young, form and imagination, and spiritual and material as is God's reflection

in life. The adolescent grace of Hermes – the joy of art lovers – reflects his relaxed ease in moving, as if he is composed of vortices of subtle matter, of which, perhaps, all ancient gods are composed. In him, many honored his benevolent spirit, sometimes rather questionable because of his whimsical reasoning. “Airlifted” out of our mortal life, this hermetic messenger brings us more enigmas than messages, playing with the undifferentiated substance that is both mind and matter. Swiftly flying, he remains aware of his feet against the ground. In addition to his incomprehensible deeds in the air of the Olympians, what he does not choose to reveal to us stays a mystery in full daylight. Capable of infinite transformations, Mercury is the vessel and the agent behind the *opus alchemicum*. Moreover, we might say that he is the key to the entire Work: the alchemy itself.

Mercury is an *anima vitalis* representing a self-generating principle that revives souls and raises spirits, but he is also a trickster, the most volatile and unpredictable of all other gods. In the Ancient Greek version, his kinky eccentricity is responsible for the archetypal controversy between Apollo and Hermes. When he was still a baby, he stole Apollo’s sacred cattle and turned around the cows’ hooves causing them leave misleading footprints. Enraged, Apollo demanded that baby Hermes – still sleeping in his cradle – tell him where the cows went. Blinking his baby eyes, Hermes asked his older brother, “what are cows?” Additionally, the smart baby pacified his older brother by presenting him a lyre with strings made from two of the sacred cows, of which Apollo was not told, of course. An ingenious half-measure. Amused by the quick wits of his son, Zeus/Jupiter made him a messenger. The celestial messenger appeared in many myths as quick as a bird, as unpredictably as a wind, and both as a friend and a foe.

Thinking of air, we associate it with weightlessness. We can feel it looking at *Window Curtain*, slight and diaphanous as a shroud. Creating the patterns as light and delicate as soap bubbles, we imagined them gathering round one like an empty cloud which shape can be seen as it flies high above, but not when it’s enveloping. In our thoughts, the air element is formless, but our sense of its invisibility is sharpened by an awareness that we cannot explain. Left in a condition of “free float,” the mind also displays its weightless side of thinking,

in good and bad connotations. In time, the pleasant thoughts – the light way of thinking that originates in a moment of ease – tend to gravitate towards doubts and matter. Should that tendency develop into something more serious, the apathetic detachment might create a wretched atmosphere, stifling air, and if we are still to call it air, that air will exhibit leaden – leaden is the word – lightness. We can duplicate the difference between weightless and weighty air by comparing simple patterns of human behavior: the imaginative, élan, and cheerful self-confidence of youths and the polished tact in conversations with a nice-looking customer. The intellec-

Window Curtain © 2001





Balloons © 2003

tual inspiration born of the gentle aspect of air differs from the ambitious intelligence sharpened by the exploiting instinct that inspires, in Hermann Hesse's words, "that bizarre idol, called progress and evolution, in which house owners believe so desperately."⁵² In any way, there are many meanings of air depending on what each of us holds in our heart.

Perhaps the most constant quality of this element would be its fluctuating inconstancy. In the air, everything is in a subjunctive mood – everything is the air. In a grammar book, we came across an interesting example rendering that subjunctive airy flimsiness so dazzlingly clear and simple that



Helicopter B-50 © 2001

we feel we ought to reproduce it here.
I might not if I could.
I should not if I might.
I must not, yet I may.

The uncertain words seem to flutter like butterflies in back-and-forth motions. Air is often associated with freedom: everyone wants to breathe the free air. Facing the east, the sunrise, and the beginning, one has many hopes expanded with air, which communicative ambiance is expressive and active, intoxicated and light-headed – and it is changeable. Granted, the word “free” has too many connotations: it is an organic part not only of freedom, but also of free-fall, Free-

masons, and free love. And most so-called freethinkers live in a world of ideas that are usually not their own. Taken *in toto*, the keyword for many meanings of the air would be free association.

The photographic twin-like composition *Mind-Wind* depicts a somewhat related idea: “mind” is written on one forehead, while on the other, it turns into “wind.” The windy nature of the human being is suggested by this very word “mind” that the mirror reflects as “wind.” Both photographs are printed from the same negative, but the second one is flipped over. What are we dealing with here: “windless mind” or “mindless wind”? This is one more conundrum to think about. With the “rotation” of this word, we come to see the restless side of the mind, the state when it is quickly caught up in a false concept, which the mind tends to constitute as its personal “truth.” In that sense, a nice object lesson might be learned from a Zen story of two monks, who when watching the heavy wind could not come to an agreement on what is rotating: the weathercock or the wind. So they asked their master to settle their dispute, which he did by replying: “The mind is rotating.”

Air (as a wind) involves an element of freedom and caprice and tends to emphasize speed over strength. Swimming in the vague upper air, people with such a disposition often exhibit carefree or whimsical characters. Talking about freedom, we have to admit that free will and necessity make a pair of opposites that is difficult to transcend. Since air was considered the noblest of the four elements, we need to leave it some extra space, saying that it gives more freedom than the other three of the quaternary. Our thoughts are free to wander as they please, but one must not take one’s personal freedom in the sense of ridiculous irresponsibility, creating one’s own values in unfettered liberty. Idiosyncrasy in such matters is only a sign of misunderstood freedom; moreover, the habit of acting merely on personal consideration only increases human bondage. Taking into account the empirical fact that all human feelings are mixed up with their opposites, we dare to suggest that people are struggling for freedom in every transgression they commit. Even if it is a misguided conjecture, we have not yet entirely rid ourselves of it.

The notion of freedom may seem a little confusing in view

of the fleeting fragility of all living things. Taking for granted this condition, with his body planted in the earth, man placed his heaven in the sky, somewhat suspended in the air, free, and invisible in the matter. But if we are to air our opinion about freedom, the state that we would call free must be so free that it would not still be subjected to its freedom; in other words, it has to be liberated even from the concept of libera-

Mind-Wind © 1992,
photos, aluminum,
pencil, 183 x 117 cm



tion. In theological terms, freedom is measured not by subtle motivations, but as an absolute value, meaning that our souls are in God, and God is free, free in being and in non-being, in time and out of it. That state is not contingent on anything, and the laws of our reality are suspended in it.

The air element is essential for the sense of justice requiring a certain level of intellectual development, ethics, and mental discrimination as an ability to notice differences between right and wrong. Astrological Libra (the scales) is an air sign. Justice needs air. In Ancient Egypt, judges were priests of Maat, the goddess of justice, whose weightless

Scale © 2008, photo,
metal, engraving



feather, light as air, was placed on the scale of judgement against the heart of the diseased. In afterlife judgment, the weight of the soul was determined by weighing it against the feather.

Air is something that has no appearance. Bringing the invisible into a picture is as tricky as nailing a shadow to the earth. Its state of lightness is as empty as space and as weightless as air. To reflect that quality in art, we let our images float in some inviolable sphere where levitation is meant to be as weightlessly expressive as the movement of a butterfly. The figures are slim and always covered, or rather *clothed*, in the coils and sweeps of the long hair. If there is some violence in their poses, there is also some grace, in so far as they are not only the forms but also the functions. The situations in which the images appear are not a natural condition, but rather little miracles, unexpected and, perhaps, contrary to the laws of nature. Everything has to be in unison with intentions, like the correct breathing vivifying the lightness of being and the inner pulse of life. In the old Taoist sources, the process of breathing is explained as “not forcing,” when mind and breath are kept on each other. “Not forgetting, not forcing, quietly, gently; the breath is vigorous, and the mind is free.”⁵³ Perhaps, in the most perfect state, the state independent of the body, breathing in and breathing out coincide. In all its little maneuvers against common sense, to give the air element an animate status, it manifests its contrast to the earth element, wrapping around its rocks like a mass of fluffy clouds. In proportion to our identification to the earth element, which is bound, one can feel free, bound, or as hard as a rock. In that sense, air exists in opposition to earth.

Taking into account the net effect of this internal contradiction, we wanted to express a pneumatic state of consciousness. It is impossible to construct a purely spiritual world, even in theory, since everything there would be in flux and made up of potentialities, including spiritual realization. In such efforts, art is rather innocent in comparison to theology and philosophy, leaving us with the hermeneutics of supposable. Artists also write, but write with pictures, with which they exorcize their demons and envisage things in an ascending scale of beauty and harmony. As to the picturing of free air that expresses possibilities of consciousness challenging materialism, it seems to “levitate” towards the images of

birds that are nearly free of gravity. They appear in our photographs in a variety of ways: flying, sitting, hatching, or folded like the origami. Naturally, the bird is the traditional symbol of the soul, “one that raises no dust and leaves no tracks,” in Salinger’s definition. The weightless soul is much more vibrant than any perfect “lightweight” personality; nevertheless, a telepathic connection between the two is also possible. One’s character must be special and exalted for that enigmatic bird to reveal itself.

Spreading its wings in the air, the bird does not see the air that supports it, but knows it’s there without looking. For us, made of sizable flesh, that is very different: the air van-

Under the Wings © 1998



ishes as soon as we try to grasp it with our hands. Yet, it attracts us upward into its space; we enjoy the arch of the rainbow, the view of the sky, perhaps the only perfect view worth seeing. If only we would not be hindered by the other elements: “anchored” to the practicality of the earth, allured by pleasures of the water, and excited by the audacity of the fire. All life appears to be split by these elemental alternatives enveloping man whose sense of “ought” and “ought not” is ever too brittle.

Talking about air regarding the weightlessness of the spiritual body in which our consciousness lives, it is not a standard to live up to, yet it is not an entirely imaginary construct hedging us against our fear of mortality. The contemplative mindset gives one a certain protection from the restless world and helps make it easier to absorb the idea that our bodily form is appended to the spirit in keeping with the spirit’s needs, not vice versa. Passing from one condition to

Papagena © 2004





Parachute © 2003

another of the hierarchy of states, an explorer of that kind will sense that the ground under his feet is thinning out and earth is receding from him. Cautiously, he may take *A Step Out*, discovering the elasticity of the air known only to birds.

That may sound like a piece of rhetoric about only theoretically possible better possibilities. We are heavily weighted with things, and however smoothly we may justify it, it blocks our inner progress. The maxim, “Give your things away, and follow me” (Luke 18:22) is common to many teachings. Regardless of the different languages used, roughly the same truth is expressed, but you cannot expect people to get by with only the truth or half of it; even less than

this is usually enough to motivate and guide people in their lives. The kind of knowledge that we accumulate gradually over a lifetime is far from the real ultimate knowledge that is an ineffable gift of spirit. Perhaps, Plotinus' expression: "a fly of an alone to the Alone," explains it better, magnifying and illuminating what we tend to leave unsaid.

How could one express such ideas except by translating them into the invisible? Even avid poetic images – and *A Step Out* is one of them – must have some essence if they are to be regarded as more than mere art. By moving closer to the secrets of simplicity in art, depicting only the minimum visual elements, and when it is necessary, over the emptiness

A Step Out © 1997



of the black background, it would be easier to evoke a near-mystical resonance existing beyond the immediate surface of the artwork. The imagination can create an entire world ontologically almost as real as the material world in which this imagination operates. It can create a tentative body out of subtle matter or no matter at all, from thought and by thought. Moreover, the imagination of other people can participate in our imaginations... It is conceivable, of course, that any suchlike progression is suggestive of maya, incessantly bearing forth all kinds of *Dinge an sich*. Nonetheless, the creative process goes along with the foremost law and in accordance with a spiritual reality that gives rise to a physical reality, and not the other way around.

Trying to catch the moments of the presence of the diffused, benign air element, we expressed it with emptiness, with an invisible image of an invisible spirit seemingly too fragile to exist. In the air element, consciousness is intensified while bodily awareness is weakened. That can take one outside oneself, outside the limitations of one's normal personality wrapped up in the routines of everyday life's. The spirit, being the most perfect, occupies the least possible space.



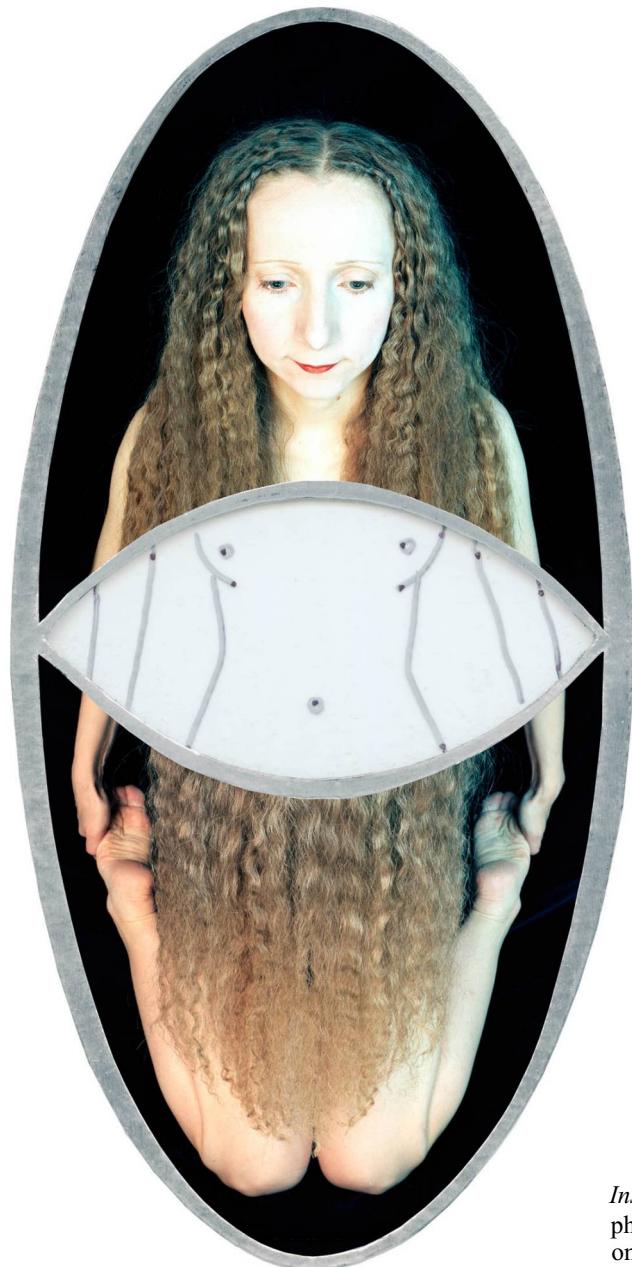
We do not say that a being is not here for oneself and for all others: each entity is here and knows it, just as any living creature believes in its own existence. That awareness has little or nothing to do with reason. In poetry and art, these high matters easily appeal to our imaginations and sometimes affect our daily lives (or could affect it). It may be experienced as sudden vertigo when everything floats before your eyes, and you cannot seize any outline. Fired by convictions of greater force, you might feel yourself moving freely beyond your gravitational field, turning into a bystander of your own existence. In that airy lightness, the intention is the "doer," leaving the body reflexive and spontaneous, which makes it seem almost absent. But exactitude with which emptiness performs its "feats of art" is there. The soul seems to function without the body while looking at it from apart, as if it is a kind of garment.



Bodiless © 1996, drawing on
glass, the transparent silhouette
is cut out from the photograph

You might say that such experimentations are not of those that belong to the human lot and even if they do, any unique experience is usually swallowed by the routine of the day. As a distant possibility veiled in many meanings, a spiritual epiphany might linger in human memory, frequently appearing in our dreams. In them, we acquire the faculty to rise aloft, slipping into the allurements of unrepressed freedom from our own bodies, which are not dead but somehow returned to their primeval elements. Our dream world is elastic, and there is no gravitational force on our

feet. Sometimes before waking up, we find ourselves falling through the air in slow motion, waiting to hit the land. Then we open our eyes and see about us nothing of that kind – as



Inside the Egg © 1995,
photo, metal, drawing
on glass

always, all things obey the rigid law on the planet that scientists inform us is heaviest of all the nearby planets: we are back in the earth element. Even if these dreamed free floats exist nowhere, except in the creative mind, they tend to inspire poetry and art. Without losing touch with reality, at least partly, visual art makes the inner world visible; it can elevate this life while upraising its meaning, giving it free hands and free air, as we should say in the context of the air element. Sometimes, even a few scraps of the inner world might be useful for the restoration of its wholeness. The decision might be at one's fingertips, as literally as it is in the

Pregnant © 1995, photo,
metal, drawing on glass



image *The Prodigal Son*, depicting an elusive self, its unexplained absence, and its sudden return.

Rendering an intangible substance with a tangible means of expression is difficult. Trying to keep within the acceptable terms of human experience – matter-of-fact in some ways and quite fantastic in others – we had to catch a moment that gave the body the formative independence of its own gravity. Or so we felt. Thus, in *The Prodigal Son*, the image of the son exists only tentatively, and yet he is there, like the smile without the cat. Neither his real feet nor his drawn head are unfamiliar to his would-be mother, who visually assumes both roles of parent and offspring. In technical terms, the son's feet were added with the help of the double exposure of his mother's feet, while his bald head is just a drawing made on her breast. Combining the medieval and somewhat playful elements, we wanted to shift not only the feeling of reality but also the measure of judgment. The self has returned as a son, who is now the other and yet the same, self-imploring for forgiveness. For though we commune with the self only in spirit, we have almost nothing to say to it in the flesh. How could one describe the indescribable avoiding a flood of banal self-important words? In a picture language, our story of the prodigal son has less to do with life's external events; the son is the other side of his mother, the lost half of her own. Eastern thought gives the key to this integration – the ego has landed and disappeared in the real self that is causeless and self-contained. The idea of redemption derived from the old tale – perhaps half fact, half fiction – seems to belong to all levels of culture, to all ethics and all pearls of wisdom appearing in rugged beauty, whether referring to art or not. The self is both the prodigal and prodigious son, both now and then, exhibiting excesses of their subconscious.

Moving from the abstract to the less abstract interpretation of the air element, we have to mention its psychosomatic influence on our life. At the psychological level, it manifests with a different intensity in each character, unless it is obscured by a veil of good manners or bears a heavy mark of fate. Some qualities of the air might be suppressed, some distorted, while others magnified as much as any other element. A person might be as light and graceful in his/her movement as air, carefree and lighthearted, unconcerned and elusive.

Conversely, there are those who are too windy and full of long important-sounding words. In a further departure from what is normal, a temperamental “windswept” individual



The Prodigal Son © 1996

might appear and in fact be appallingly moody, irritably bilious, treacherously unpredictable, and even as dangerous as a typhoon. The closer we look at the erratic factors of the air phenomenon, the more grotesque they become in human temperament, which air element is carried and dispersed as if by the wind.



Balloon Ride © 1995,
photo, metal

Nature can burst from us humans in the form of some elemental force coming from the instinctive basic substratum. One can feel that one's own breath and the breath of the wind and the sea and one's own mind are one, as in *Windy*

Scroll. To develop the simile further, we would suggest applying the Beaufort wind scale, which uses a numeric scale from 0 to 12 to measure air velocity and force, to human temperament. Beginning from a calm state

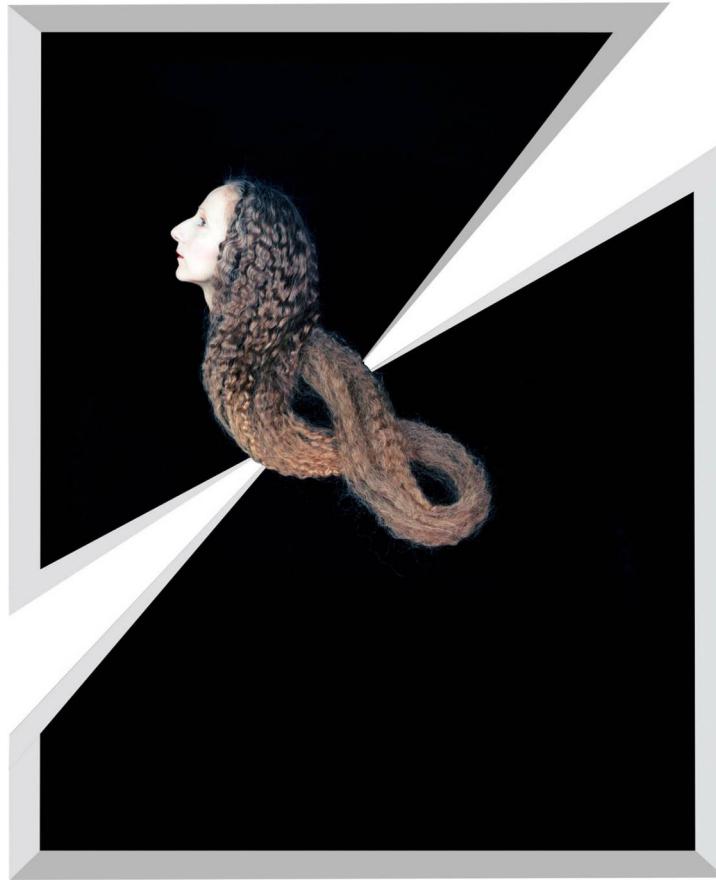
(#0 – velocity 0-1 knots),
it rises from a slight, moderate, then strong breeze
(#5 – 25 knots)
to fresh and whole gale
(#10 – 50 knots),
culminating in a storm or hurricane
(#12 – above 65 knots).

There is a kind of telepathic connection between the upper and the lower phases. Empirically speaking, we all know that the still air presages thunder, which is also characteristic to people in whom still waters run deep.

Air is a segment of infinity; at least it is one of the ways to imagine what is alien to the physical sense. People with airy temperaments tend to see dreams about flying, in which they are enamored of heavy winds and vast empty panoramas. Here we must say that the empty background is also an immanent part of our works as if some invisible force had “vacuumed” through them, leaving the background blank and bare. Colorless black infinity fills the space with immateriality; the non-existent background is stretching out in a sin-



Windy Scroll © 2008,
photo, metal



Dragon Fly © 1998,
photo, metal

gle uninterrupted surface veiled in blackness having no dimensions.

Even though the empty panoramas or the simple black background in our photographs signifies the emptiness, it is not that emptiness in which chaotic nothingness reigns – we are not supporters of lost causes. Undeniably, there is a hint of fog in the air, in which things are not what they are in that half-photographable darkness obscuring the view completely. The unbroken horizon and the entire absence of the organic life in the background are meant to induce not the sense of vacuum and utter separation, but rather to speak of some significant, not barren emptiness pregnant with

meaning that has not been expressed yet. Unattached to both social context and place in general, the works seem to lead to a world from which everything is absent, everything except the self. With that uncertainty towards the temporal and geographical location, the self can build the bridge to “nowhere” in which light and darkness merge into the absolute. The self fills the emptiness to leave no room for trivialities or anything else, in other words, the soul asserts its presence by filling all the emptiness or presence *in potentia*. Plato put it plainly in *Republic* (VII, 518 C): “The entire soul must be turned away from this world of change and shadows until its eye is able to endure the bright shining light of reality, and the

Osiris in Spring © 1998,
photos, metal



brightest of all realities, which we have called the Good.”⁵⁴

In addition to the black background giving emphasis to the delicately austere figures, we applied a somewhat “paranormal” for photography principles, making certain parts of the photographs literally non-existent – we cut them out. Despite their different shapes, all the cutouts serve the same purpose of rendering intangible elements like air or light, of which *Slit* is a case in point. Focused on the palm of the hand, the invisible ray of light is created out of the airy emptiness, literally wedging into the photorelief. Light by which we see, cannot be seen. We see only what it illuminates.

Slit © 1998/2009, photo
in aluminum construc-
tion, 122 x 99 cm



Music cannot be seen either, we see only by whom and by what it is made, but its effect is pleasing and stimulating. It seems rather worthless to attempt an analysis of its claims upon human emotions. The massless purity of music allows it to pass through our beings – listen and something unusual might take place in you. Photographs can depict the atmosphere of music only silently, so it is in the image *Pianist*, suggesting an extraordinary telepathic connection between the musician and the instrument. The pianist, thin as a reed, inspired, if not mesmerized, with her hands uninvolved, attentively watches how some spectral fingers are moving

Pianist © 1998,
photos, metal



over the keyboard. There is no piano per se, only an open cutout of emptiness, from which the sounds come, made by the fingers of no one in particular painted as if they are keys producing notes. The uninvolved piano player and the half-existent instrument are one another. The music is all in our minds.

The presence of music in our life was overwhelming; it was always in the background while we worked. The organic connection and the interaction between the art of images and the art of sounds are self-evident. Both these forms of creativity repeat and explain each other's patterns and stages of development, expressing the ebbs and flows of consciousness – not only of their author's, but also of everyone sensitive to the arts. Those individuals, immersed in the grace of the overpowering harmonies, can carry them in their aura. Sensing that, we also wanted to express these harmonies in our pictorial language. From the first glance, the images, which appear to be done with a somewhat agile lightness and gentle humor, would have more affiliation with the moods of the sparkling levitating melodies of mercurial Mozart and enchanting seraphic tunes of Purcell devoted to her majesty Venus. Indeed, they are reflected in our language of forms, but their content is always geared towards the transfiguring harmonies of Bach. The themes in our photo-narrations yield to the ideas akin to the timeless internal melodies, both keeping the bridge between pictorial and sonar perception of the spiritual content.

The further the more, our visual records were attuned to Bach's cantatas, his musical sermons that filled out both our living and creative spaces. We seemed to imagine music visually. On the score of the great variety of his cantatas, we would say that they and the passions include almost all European musical experience before and after him, everything else is just an addition to the main. Bach is a collective soul of all choral and instrumental music, summated in the spiritual content of the Passion-drama. Albert Schweitzer wrote that Bach's real religion was not Lutheranism, but mysticism. Bach supplied the purest religious feeling and consolation, and "combined in his music both joy in living and serenity in the face of death... To plunge your whole soul in Bach is exactly the same as doing theology."⁵⁴ Outside the province of canonical understanding, Bach is like a great tree

shaping the environment of our musical history: his influence streams on everything big and small equally in abundance.

The network of man's doing might be expressed in transitory conclusions. The finite cannot conceive the infinite; therefore, our relative mind can describe the absolute only in



Echo © 1995-2006,
photo, metal

relative terms: poetical, musical, mathematical, etc. Not everybody likes when all answers are spelled out, whereas art and music not only convey their subliminal edifying messages discreetly, but are also clear to the eye and easy on the ear. These musical sermons with indistinctive words but uniquely distinctive sounds of music express their messages through harmony preceding their textual meaning. The same applies to the art which visual harmony precedes an interpretation and remains the *lex secreta* of many skills.

As to our visual “cantatas” for a single voice or for a duet, they are accompanied by photographic instruments: cameras, light meters, and flashlights. Like a sequential melody, the entire work proceeds by time and consistent thinking. In a progressive projection of ideas and forms onto matter, we try to maintain the rhythmic measure based equally on the cyclic narrative and the eternal principle. Visual criteria help to hold the story within readable limits. Our contemplative images that seem to concern our personal eschatology are thoroughly shaped by the archetypal and are obtained not only from our own experiences, but are also rooted in the history of mythical and mystical associations. An obscure word is scattered here and there. We try to pick it up, shape it through our art, and allow the elements of rhythms and visual harmonies to reflect musical harmony in their peculiar iconographic ways.

The subtler the thoughts, the subtler depictions of the human figure they engender; after all, man has to be better than his body. In the series *Cutouts*, the body is often represented *in absentia* by empty space, thus achieving not only a state of weightlessness but also invisibility. In the image *Subliminal Child*, the child’s figure has been cut out of the photograph – He’s meant to be “transparent to transcendence,” to use Karlfried Dürckheim’s term. The vacant silhouette casts a soft shadow on the wall seen through its outline, thus acquiring three-dimensional yet ephemeral depth. The transparency of the image of the child means not his absence, but rather a state of sublimation forecasting His relatedness and final exit into a transcendent zone, which is above all that is tangible and sensible. “*Noli me tangere!*” (“Touch me not!”), said Christ to Mary Magdalene after He got out of His sepulcher. Transparent in consciousness, the soul is entirely ray-like.

In honorable historical continuity in art, this situation is quite the opposite: the invisible is made visible and sensual, thus making transcendent forces to acquire physical often anthropomorphic forms. The Indian and Hellenic gods appear to have quite sensual bodies, Yahweh is pictured with a beard, angels wear white robes, and paradise is a bountiful agricultural scene, representations of which belong predominantly to the cultural content of naive art. As to the chaos of the lower regions, there are all kinds of perversities, the most

memorable dramatization of which belongs to the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. All such visual displays of metaphysical ideas and their uneasy presence in the rough-and-ready world were rather natural and fit for real life. The painters are not to be blamed for the naturalism: they did what they could. Focusing on the simple sense for good or bad things in life,

Subliminal Child © 1995, photo
stainless steel, 116.8 x 85.7 cm,
collection of Nasher Museum of
Art, Duke University, NC



they tried to express the subtle ideas ambiguously, sometimes even half-clairvoyantly, as if a mortal in their vision was acknowledging kinship with an immortal. Naturally, we thought of it too, and, perhaps, that very idea embedded into our image *Subliminal Child* was responsible for its rather unusual display at the Nasher Museum of Art, where it was temporally exhibited among the original Renaissance paintings with the perennial theme of Madonna.



Nasher Museum of Art,
Duke University, NC, 2000

In its benign expression, the air element operates as an impulse of vitality in life, raising spirits with its vibration, expansion, and all-pervasiveness. We aimed to reflect these qualities; hence some of the images are seemingly hanging in space, pinned to the air like holograms, or soaring into the infinite, while the others, primarily those in the *Cutouts* series, depict air as “the absence of presence.” At the same time, all these works, whether looking weightless or not, are integrated parts of the unifying view of the whole, in which all things, the four elements included, interact and react upon each other. For example, the image *Retort* is a triune combination of fire, water, and air; the latter is depicted by the emptiness of the vessel connected with space around it, as in the

Indian saying, "The air in a jar is one with the air everywhere."

To reside exclusively in one element is to subject oneself to the limitation of this element that gives only a one-sided view of the world. Together, the elemental forces represent an invisible broadcast of energy in harmony and discord; and humans, especially those living closer to their basic feelings, are somewhat entrained to them. Rarely, you meet a person who knows in his conscious reasoning his innermost unreasonable urges and drives, strengths and weaknesses, and how to deal with them. Naturally, the discord of the elemental forces is reflected in human characters, often appearing in cooperation that has no other purpose than to show how utterly unlike one person is to the other. In spite of the friendship among individuals of different dispositions, they might be so apart as air and earth, as water and fire. For example, a person with the pronounced element of air, endowing him

Retort © 1998, photo, metal



with wonderful clarity of thought, abstract intellectuality, or merely making him prone to harmless absentmindedness, begins to suffocate in the atmosphere of gross practicality, as in the airless density of the earth. The opposite is the case when an earth-oriented person has to surrender himself to an overly intellectual opponent, whose imposing superiority appears to him to represent a potentially alien and hostile element. Too much thinking is a waste of time; some people find it even dangerous, sensing that an intellectual challenge is more applicable to their fears than to their minds.

The earth element is focused on the material aspect of life which security is rooted in the collective expression of spirituality. More than others, the earth-minded people thank God, whose existence they question occasionally but usually never think about it, taking Him for granted. In regards to His promise of immortality, their position boils down to this: if supposedly, the soul lives in the eternity, then there is no point worrying about it, it can take care of itself; you better take care of the body, which does not live forever, and as the less fortunate the body needs more attention. It is easy to be deeply unsatisfied with the state of humanity, but what can one do about it? All our good deeds are not meant to save the world, but are just to make our lives more agreeable. In any way, you cannot outfox your destiny. Hence, for some, their home is the earth, while others feel at home in the world of ideas. Nevertheless, the opposites are always complimentary, working together in a half-hating, half-admiring way. That is how the air and earth elements interact, quarrel, and take pleasure in each other.

Now stepping down from the airy clouds, down to the ground, we shall concentrate on the earth element that has been placed firmly in our art both literally and conceptually. Described and analyzed from the actual grains of soil to the principles of hyle (matter, Gr.) in Book 1: *Be-Lie-Ve* (ch. 6: *E-art-h*), it merely needs to be given an additional air of mystery in this chapter. During the *Belle Époque*, when literary realism and naturalism became popular, painters began to express *joie de vivre* even of the earthiest subjects, evoking inside our heads both happy rural images and delirious cabaret scenes. Their aesthetical way of examining, so to speak, the topography of the earth element might be complemented by a conceptual approach employing modern theories

and metaphors. Imagine, we are not only on the Earth; we are in the universe. That idea comprises all mental states from the local terrene sensibility to the universal awareness. Having that in mind, we'll try to observe the earth element from various perspectives: beginning with its densest regions and funeral aspects, and concluding with its surface of many patches of light and dark, where the earth meets the air.

Earth was present in Valeriy's thinking just as much as in his artworks, the most basic of which *One Square Meter of Earth* shows the very substance of earth, dissected for examination of its physical remains in a sort of autopsy. "And the earth was without form and void; and the darkness was upon

V. G., *One Square Meter of Earth*,
1975, soil, Plexiglas, 100 x 100 x 10 cm



the face of the deep," as Genesis (1:2) describes the earth embryo. Science has since added many facts to the theological hypothesis, one of them is the exact weight of the Earth, which is not only the heaviest of all the planets in our solar system but also gains around 10 tons per day. So is the terra firma state of our infirm unsteady life. As to *One Square Meter of Earth*, the title of the piece refers to its abstract principle as a measuring unit of earth, which extremely detailed content looks harmless to the human eye. But in this micro-world, the merciless jungle of life-eat-life is worse than a science-fictionist could ever have imagined. The subject matter may seem a little grey given that nature is neither

On the Wheels © 1997





Hammock © 1997

friendly nor hostile to the principle of life. Fully acknowledging the limitations of the sphere of earth, we pictured it mainly figuratively, except for several images of the close-up of the soil, the hyperreal earth. Even then, we envisioned it in balance with the other elements, as it is in *Hammock*, which composition is frozen in swinging. Concisely, it can be described as this: a figure, or rather half of it, light as a feather, is swinging in the flaming hammock above the carpet of the earth. The camera's triple exposure mode did the simple work of merging three frames: the airy image of a lightweight body, the grainy substance of earth, and the fiery hammock drawn by a flashlight during a slow exposure.

The earthy portion of the human psyche presupposes all that is stable, grounding, materially oriented, heavy, and slow. The body dominates the soul expression. The earth supports productivity and gives fertility, therefore it is con-



Globe © 1996, photo, metal

sidered feminine, just like water. In necessary counterpoise to them, air and fire are called masculine. The earth is round and has no corners from which measurements might be made; so is the ego, which starting-point is unknown. That simile, strange as it may sound, contains reason. The enormous technique of the ego performance includes all kinds of tricks ranging from natural and straightforward expressions to emotion-laden theatrical ethos and pitiless revolts. In trapping the inflow of the spiritual force or what scholastic theology calls actual graces, the ego is somewhat similar to the earth element representing the great boundary entrapping light in its substance.

The geology of ego has many strata; its “pungent onion” is made up of layers and veiled in many meanings. Linking them to earth, we can identify their outer and inner content, somewhat similar to topsoil, subsoil, and bedrock. Of these three, the latter is the oldest; it is a stone vault of our subconscious formation ever waiting for the earthquake to crack the surface. That innate instinctual zone in the human psyche might be safely compared to the interior part of the earth, the very bottom of it, obscure, dark, and dangerous. If we were to relate them to something capable of being heard, they would

Map © 1995, photo, metal



share a distinctive sound – a low-frequency ground bass grave in tone, replicated in Tibetan monks chanting. It is a sound of the lowest chakra *Muladhara*, the tenebrous womb where nature dwells in a trance. In that portion of the earth element, everything solidifies and putrefies in a terrifying way, until a new seed is ready to appear from the volcanic energy storage.

Blending all its elemental qualities, the ego always gravitates towards fulfillment on earth. We must repeat that air, fire, water, and earth are all earthly here, however sublime they may look, they are too much grounded, corruptible, and impure. Through them, we maintain our ground connection continually, as if an electrical current goes through our bodies which are material and, behaving respectively, seek vigorous satisfaction in life. Because of matter, we have weight; and here on earth, our grounding is permanent. In short, the body represents the earth element, and it is here at home, confident and acquisitive, always dominant over idealistic inclinations in man. It eats, drinks, and enjoys the physicality of its existence alien to the spirit, which herein is in exile.

Earth represents things which are solid; it gives stability wielded by characters that are physically strong or imposing. If they are creative, they are rather re-creative, patiently changing “matter of course” into a “matter of fact.” They put their faith in something solid and predictable, and believe in self-importance, good health, and hard work. People aligned with this element might be passive and active, even aggressively stubborn, but always enduring. As to the external factors of their lives, they are also characteristic of permanence, which can be either barren with soil or endowed with abundance in life. Earth gives and takes; it is stuff and substance, the most rigid of the four elements. Let us compare the air and earth elements using simple cookware. Both glass and pottery are made by means of fire, but glass is somewhat vitalized through breath making its substance flexible. Broken glass vessels can be melted and re-blown, while the earthenware – pottery that literally comes from clay soil – breaks down irreversibly in crocks. Put differently, life reaches out to the upper air element, and declines in the nocturnal darkness of the earth. In that, the earth is naturally opposed to air.

Dividing our thoughts against themselves in this air and



Unfolding Map © 1993,
photo, metal

earth dialog, we would like to put them at the service of art, which pitch might be pure, suffering no discordant note. If the earthly life for the soul was considered a fall – a gravitational fall like an apple from an apple tree – why not give its curvature a human touch? So we did in the *Unfolding Map* where the figure literally lands on earth. To give it a range of

psychological aperçu, we would spell it calligraphically like this:

in
to
it
if

Knowledge of the external world is rooted in the experience of the body in matter. Involuntarily, man has to bend his mind to that insight that comes from knowledge of gross reality carrying the weight of inbuilt inertia. Hopefully, the head knows what the feet are after and what they “think” of. Making the metaphor an actual plot device, we fleshed it out: the earth element is mapped on the traveler’s feet. Can such an unfolding map, a conceptual map of reality rather than of reality itself, be a helpful implement in world navigation? There are things that we all know, though we don’t know how we know them, perhaps, even from our babyhood while learning to stand on the ground with our two feet.

Refocusing from cartography to mythology, to the earth goddess or our terra mater, we can imagine her in both her major and minor keys, but what we can see, in effect, is only her feet. They are spread out upon the ground as blue mountains, rivers running in all directions, blessed greenness, profusions of colors, and many other terrestrial wonderments. The Earth is our footing, foundation, and condition; and our feet are on the earth, which is a simple non-scientific fact. But what can earth offer to the immortal soul, that earth-bound astronaut? What is it for the soul in that ground matrix with its knotty maze of many roads? How does one find the way out their labyrinth? Perhaps, there is one path, although it has been charted differently on so many maps. In fact, any creed is a kind of map suggesting its story to prove a point. In spite of the enchanting cosmography, neither of them gives the exact location of heaven as being somewhere within the visible universe, thus leaving us to rely only on the invisible.

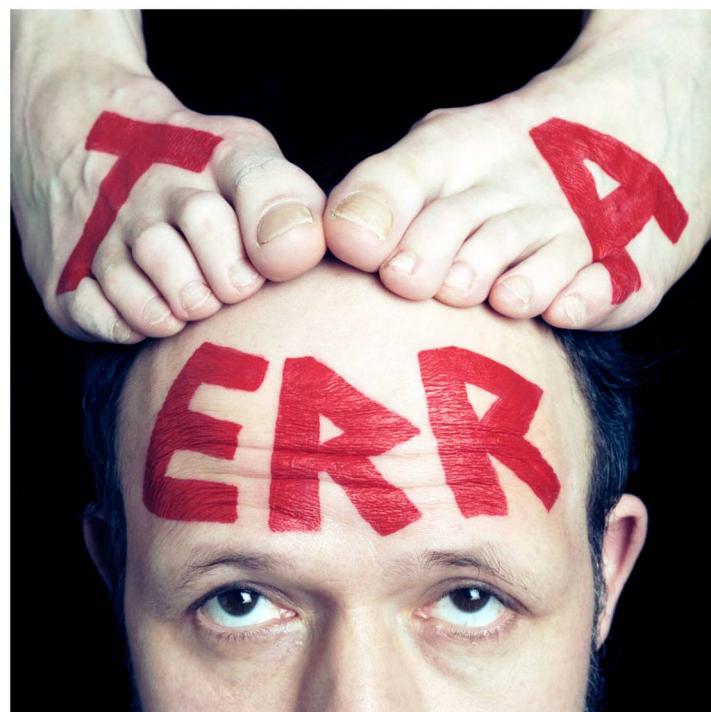
Appealing to visual and slightly supernatural aids, the *Unfolding Map* does not shake the matter-oriented sense of reality. The map merely sketches the general flux of nature where all things are connected. Up is understandable only

when paired with down, right with left, and white with black. Accordingly, the image suggests free-flowing adaptability, tentatively unifying things superior and things inferior, the head and the feet, heaven and earth, the abstract world and the world of particular things obeying the laws of the matter. There are, however, shortcuts to that idea that could be put in code:

EARTH IS YOURS

Behind all life, there are dynamic forces that act upon all living things. If water is moved by gravity, earth is gravity itself, while air and fire are free from it. Earth and water have the same vectors downwards, save the former is stronger and heavier. The earth element is characteristic with endurance, but nothing can endure on the Earth; and its waters present the most vivid example of that flux, which will be addressed in the following chapter.

Terra © 1989



6: WATER IN FIRE

Water has no precise contour or shape typical of the earth, but it is everywhere and in everything. If we could explain exactly what water is, we could explain life itself, tracing its living principle in *aqua vitae*. For a change and for reasonable measure, let us turn to some empirical facts that strictly address physical life and the body rather than explore metaphysical ideas and challenges of the psyche. Considering the encyclopedic facts that water occupies more than 72% of earth's surface, that 85% of all inhabitants of Earth reside in the sea, and even we, the most advanced creatures here, are made up of 70% of water, one might wonder why after all we call this planet Earth and not Water. Adding more water to its already high enough percentage, the authorities in the field of cataclysmic geology say that the biblical flood is a regular part of the earth's life cycle: it has happened many times in the past and will repeat consistently until our solar system enters eternal sleep. Water pumps endlessly through all inanimate and animate tissues of life, including ours. For every 50 pounds of weight, we should drink one quart of water per day, which is crucial for our metabolism. Among living mammals, only gazelles can survive without drinking water since they are capable of extracting moisture from solid food. The subtle motivation behind our mentioning that Afro-Asian wonder beast is rather simple: only 1% of fresh water is suitable for drinking, the remaining 99% belongs the oceans and ice caps. Thinking that thought to its logical conclusion, one can envisage that in spite of the abundance of water, the drinkable *aqua vitae* might become a deficiency eventually.

These are a few facts regarding physical life, but what can be said about the water element in connection to our psyche? Its watery portion is receptive and tender, generative and creative, mysterious and mainly subconscious, perhaps somewhat passive, and definitely feminine. People of water temperament, the phlegmatic types, are prone to dreaming, which reflects their psychosomatic condition of many moods. In a healthy mental state, they tend to see in their dreams the moon, cool rivers, white snow, clear skies, swans, and beautiful environments; in short, all that has pleasant

associations with the water element. Often, their lives run easily, almost like water from a faucet. Those whom we can call “triumphantly emotional” individuals liken the water element, and the magical properties they find in it, to a mirror of the above. However, when water becomes a looking glass, it harbors a danger of drowning in one’s narcissism. The Hellenes understood that confusion very well when they magnified and illuminated it in the myth about Narcissus. To give a brief outline of it, the nymph Echo fell in love with the gorgeous Narcissus and, when rejected, turned into a lonely disembodied voice; meanwhile, Narcissus fell in love with his image, seeing its reflection in a forest pool and pined away, longing for what was unattainable. This old myth related to love and beauty ends with the reverse of anything that is promising, showing how the ego contemplates itself with compulsive introversion, intensified unto destruction. Our

Aqua Vitae © 1989

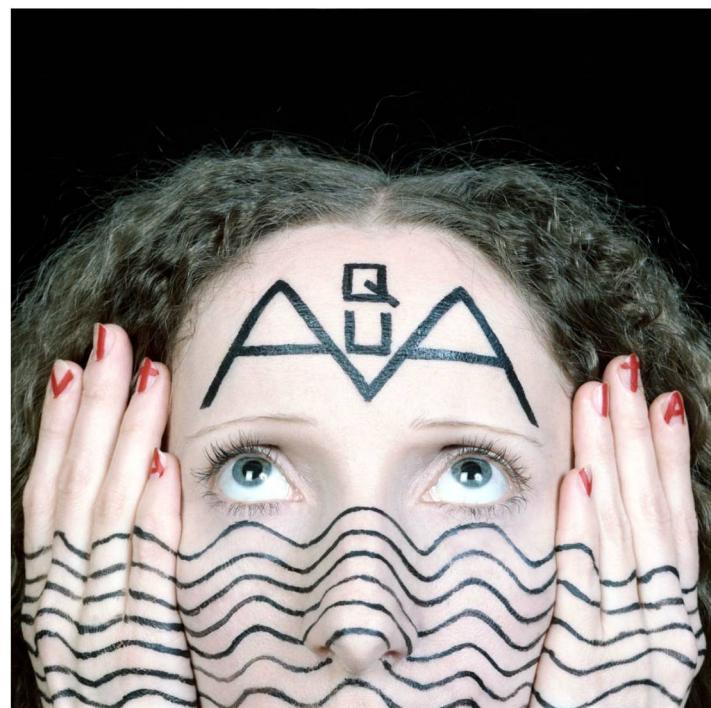


image *Echo*, however, only indirectly concerns this myth, presenting its inauspicious intoxicating situation in an oddly serene way: as a watery reflection of sound waves. Drops of H₂O fall from the sound of ECH₂O, which, in transcription from the art alphabet into a regular language, can be



Echo © 1989

presented as a picture of relaxing waterfall sounds running around in the head. In our composition, water and sound waves seem to act as congeners and exhibit the fluidity of the impressionable and responsive mind, therefore posing its own problems. Caught in its own trap, the human mind is truly full of uncertainties.

Various negative aspects of the watery psyche find their expressions in dreams about dark whirlpools, drowning, and other water-related events of troublesome content. With an air of grudging melancholy, the excess of man's depressive

thoughts and emotions could carry him almost out of his senses, reducing him to the last extremes of psychic misery. That is an effect of black waters, in which almost everyone is dipped in, at least once in a lifetime. The stoic personality always tries to keep his head above such waters, meeting his psychological troubles resolutely, and for some, with an arctic smile. But everything has its compensation. In the most dramatic cases, the unexplained mental episode that has no cause and therefore no solution might become overly exhaustive, almost a dress rehearsal for one's own death. Life is fueled by loneliness and frustration when the dark psychological waters rise above the normal. To picture it in the adventurous maritime version, one sails off into the blue and does not look back, moving like a phantom or ghost ship in the sea lacking even a murky horizon, only a monotony of the waters and their gloomy chaos. The ship is always she as the waters of the sea (*la aqua, die See, la mer*), as Mother Nature herself.

In antiquity, when people knew how to cope with time and death, the living and the dead waters indicated a split running through the entirety of creation. One was always reminded of the rivers surrounding Hades, which must be crossed in the boat of the Charon if the Elysian Fields are to be reached. Leaving this world did not mean that one is entering another if the “abhorred Styx, the flood of burning hate,” as John Milton envisioned it, is not crossed safely.⁵⁵ To be “mindful” of death is also a part of a yogi’s discipline, which includes meditation on water immanent to the notions of birth and death. We float in this water until we sink. When people die, they are like rivers reaching the sea, where they have no form and no name. In death as in dreaming, the atman, the essence of an individual, does not depend on the medium of the body as it is in the material world, where in order to support that body we must eat and drink.

Water itself changes its “incarnations” with amazing elasticity: turning into vapor rising into the sky, it returns as rain and, pouring on an ocean, is absorbed leaving no trace. Frozen water is immovable, stiffer than earth. Water has so many ways to express itself, and these ways have so many meanings depending on what one might hold in one’s heart, as Sri Ramakrishna eloquently put it, “Some water may be drunk, some may be used for worship, some for bathing, and

some only for washing dishes.”⁵⁶

Much was already said about the water element in Book 2: *Trespassing* (ch. 1: *Birth of Aphrodite*): about its many symbols of the oceanic unconscious, Aphrodisiac flux, *aqua vitae*, spiritual baptism by water, and its principle of restitution by which one is opened to another vision of life. The soul must be fluid, unhardened, unrigged, and able to move in all other elements. Even if all souls are one in their essence, every man has his own soul and cannot mix it with another like water, either to get lost or to be found, no one knows for sure. And yet, to think of some counterargument to this, everything flows into the Oneness, from which it has emerged. The so-called “astral world” in its fluid flowing, as in semi-dream or semi-illusion, might be compared to the feeling that a man has when he is moving in water. Human life also rises from the waters of mothers and in due course sinks back in Lethe, the river of oblivion, or even deeper, in the dead Styx, the mere thought of which is repugnant to human physical nature that desires life. Water is in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. “Brief is man’s life... like a bubble that appears on water when God rains,” says the Buddhist sutra.⁵⁷

Beginning from the beginning would be natural. But art is not biology, it cannot follow the mutations of amphibians, yet might use them as a biological example of the earth and water elements cooperation, for amphibians spend some time on land but breed and develop into adults in water. The water environment is abundant with life, sustaining and proliferating in water that has restorative potential. No wonder the aquatic environment seems to be serene and somewhat elastic unlike the hard waters of life in a world gone dry, to coach the comparison in metaphors. On the other hand, even the harshness of the world can dissolve in the sea of human imagination, where everything might be flexible and sustained by the protective instinct, obeying which one can find some parallels even in the development of the amphibians and *homo sapiens*. The initial tender steps, leading from generic waters of the collective consciousness to independent thinking, break the ground of the simple biological urge to exist. Within human society, this basic desire to exist is demonstrated with only a minimum of conscious presence. The mind operating only within the generic thinking is compa-

rable to undifferentiated primary waters that engulf some of us mainly in childhood and adolescence, while others bathe in it their entire life.



Birth of Aphrodite © 1992, photo,
aluminum, pencil, 107 x 122 cm, collec-
tion of Nasher Museum of Art, Duke
University, NC

What is this generic thinking which primary waters engulf the majority of the population? However different may be patterns of lives, most of them reflect the law inherent in the nature of all beings. Reduced to the two main principles – procreation and survival of the fittest – they do not



Leviathan © 2003, with real fish

lose their generic functions on an individual basis while representing the general law of the preservation of life. In simple words, the average man wants to be like everybody else, only more special and more successful than others. The further the more so, until reaching the status measurable by the dusty clichés: some people are more equal than others. The fact that people can be nicely singled out into individuals that read a daily paper, watch prime time TV, shop online, have a family, a house, and everything else necessary for a decent living does not change the general way of their thinking. At its core, such individualization does not bring about transformational changes; quite the contrary, it might only intensify the crav-

ing of nature in man, his desire for possessions, power and, progeny – to seek only this world, to amass a fortune and leave the overflow to his offspring. Within the generic collective thinking, it would be impossible to remedy the deluded reasoning based on the primal instinct ruling the social waters of mass culture and its history. On the other hand, if we take into account that all the waves and waters of the rivers hasten towards some goal, deliverance is also possible. The point might be stretched further: there is a biological tendency in man simultaneously towards uniformity and individualization. We said enough about the former, so now, let us consider the latter.

Fish Net © 2003, with real fish



The emergence from the undifferentiated depth, from the limitations of mundane practical thinking, is a primary event, a barely perceptible, insecure act still covered with the remnants of the past. Often held back by fear and insecurity, the beginner blazes a new trail by making marks. When a “raw” man experiences such changes, entering some sort of awareness, his savagery may evolve into a passion, as it often happens with religious proselytes. In the new world of self-sufficient thinking, independent enough at this stage, the beginner is navigating his own way through multiple conflicts and frustrated plans, expecting that all his trouble may be washed away someday. Seen from a slightly different perspective, “washing” is also linked to the notion of purification and ablution (*abluere*, “to wash away” in Latin). No wonder that in days bygone, there were so many water allegories alluding to the ritual bath. Some of them are reflected in our water works, the chain of which develops into a pictorial story somewhat similar to the chain of evolutionary yearnings hidden in nature. We shall examine some of these images in their ranking order of messages according to their holistic capacity.

The water element has a special power over the expression of the human psyche; and should it overwhelm it, one is in danger of drawing in the world of senses. The emotional flow, like a stream of fresh water, might go winding down into the earth, turning deep and muddy until it dries up. Similarly, human feelings might dry up in conforming to material necessity. Sensitive people train themselves to conceal the vivid emotions, but inwardly beyond their control, their emotional life might be like boiling water. Generally, characters with an affinity to water are peaceful, although they can show a propensity for violence when provoked. Their temperament is like a subterranean river that at some point can unleash its raging abyss and find its way into the open water. Our subconscious does strange things. What we experience outside and inside are two sides of the same reality, expressed in two different ways. Life could be allegorically purified by the waters of the Ganges or the celestial Nile, saved and renewed by the waters of the Jordan, so it was promised at various stages of the unfolding religious life of humanity. Since all existence seems to be based on contrasts, the water element might “overflow” itself before one is admitted to perennially

healing rivers. The overflow makes one feel dislocated in time and purpose, thus incubating one's psyche in the universal womb of "*aqua vitae*," like Jonah inside the fish – by no means a trivial process.

When the initial level of individuation is reached, the relaxed child of nature hopes to live happily ever after. That might be the way it usually goes. But as soon as he is ready for the next stage of development, that is, to be cast into the deep water again to "die" and still hope to live happily ever after, he goes through the initiation known as "baptism by water element." Switching from the general flux of the "waters

Diver © 2000



of life” to their psychological essence, one is subjected to the negative torrent, in which many wicked beings swim in prosperity, playing their wicked tricks in the endless chronicle of man’s inhumanity to man. Naturally, a stranger to such atmosphere gets a feeling of being cut off, not only from dry land but also from any recognizable viewpoint. One feels lonely, dissipated, and “ab...and...one...d,” with icy hands and funeral eyes peering into the darkened ectoplasmic reality. Even that can have some parallels to reality regarding abysmal waters: in the ocean seven miles deep (equal to the height of the Mount Everest), there is total darkness with the cacophony of obscure murmurs – and *still some life*, perhaps

Streams © 1999,
photo, metal





Flux © 1998,
photo, metal

anonymous one. For those kinds of images, the black background is especially potent: its deep blackness retains before our eyes only empty nothingness reminiscent to infinity.

(Before continuing, we have to make a little diversion concerning our style of writing often “going meta.” While the wording may seem a bit strange, it is apropos and relates to the water element associated with the subconscious that has to be apprehended intuitively. It is not the language of logic and rational thinking, but rather a merging of instinct and

spirituality. Most definitions are only partly valid and make no appeal to the eye, but to the mind. But when our mind turns from contemplation to imagination it also likes to have visual proof for what is said. To come to the point, the images contain verbal ideas and vice versa, as if the words were the picture language of water, thus uniting its verbal and non-verbal semantics.

The allegories of dark waters can make one feel a little uneasy; leaving no idea at all what might be coming next. And if a passing ship happens to appear, it will be none other than a ship of fools, which would be safer to miss than to catch. If you try to row against the current of a great river, the providential flux of the all, the current always wins. It is safer to work with it in cooperation rather than fighting it unto death. Cast in deep waters, one shall cry for help and be heard by no one but the Almighty. In bottomless isolation, you feel as if you might not be allowed back, but like the biblical manna, some unpredictable forces will get you back again. They will gather you up and put you together again unless your ego has been hardened by callousness and egocentricity or become brittle like that of the notorious irreversible egg from the nursery rhyme when “All the king’s horses and all the king’s men / Couldn’t put Humpty together again.”

In the water element, deliverance is often associated with the fishing for souls, the motive evocative of the Orphic tradition, Christian symbols, and the Arthurian legends of the Fisher King. Digging deeper, into the primordial time or the age of Leviathans, we find that the Vedic god Vishnu also took on the form of fish as a redeemer of mankind. As to the Christian fish symbol, connected in its timing with the astrological Age of the Pieces, it stands for the spelling of the word *Ichthus*, “fish” in Greek, the acrostic of which means “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior,” who is a redeemer and the miraculous Eucharistic food at the same time. One cannot say very much with mere letters and words, a glance at the evangelical picture might give better insight into the mystery of the water and the good fisherman. And the big cinematic picture is this: the sea closed up under Jesus’ feet, and He walked on water, which was only the surface, a film over that seemingly super-real world of images. That depiction seems to present an anthropomorphic parallel to what we read in the first lines of Genesis, “The spirit of God moved upon the

faces of the water," suggesting that both metaphors are based on an equation of microcosm and macrocosm. In simpler terms, to be able to walk on water means to transcend the conditions of the phenomenal world. Knowing the essence of the eternal water that does not wet His feet, the Savoir could fish human souls from the existential waters of the world, the waters that merely reflect the reverse image of the sky. In the water's reflection, everything is seen in reverse of what is in heaven, including even the principle of fishing for souls, for our human reasons for fishing are far from humanitarian ones.

Three Fishes © 2003

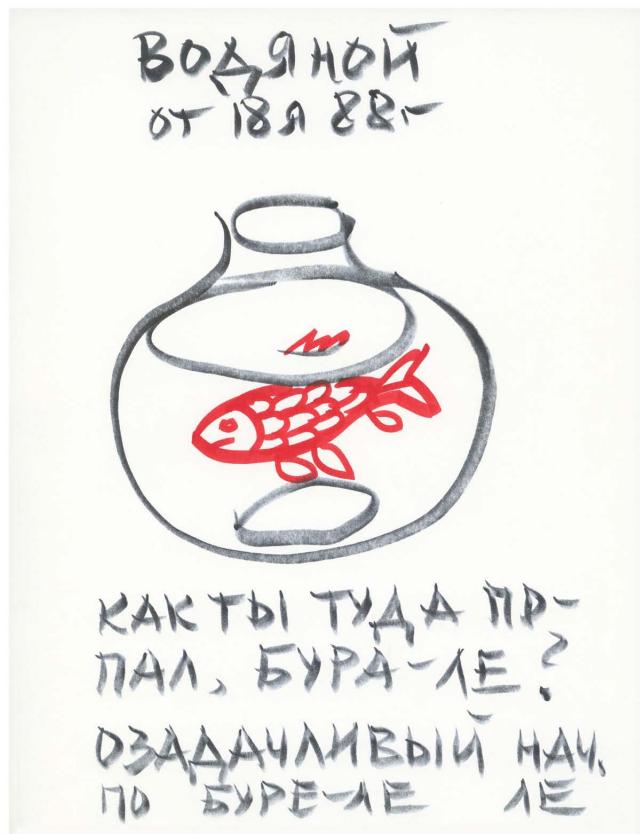


The water element pervades so many myths and allegories, either as metaphors or as featured in actual enlightening events, as in the legend about the good bishop and the three hermits retold by Leo Tolstoy. The epiphany of that story is quite moving, so we'll give a brief summary of it. Upon hearing about the miraculous deeds of the three hermits living on a tiny island, the bishop visited them and was surprised that they did not know even a simple prayer. So he taught them "Our Father," which they liked immensely. On his way back, when the ship was already far in the sea, to his great astonishment he saw the hermits running on water holding each other's hands. Approaching the ship, they begged him reverently: "Dear holy bishop, we forgot the prayer, will you kindly teach us again?" He looked at their serene faces and replied: "You do not need it anymore. Walk back in peace."

All kinds of miracles are attributed to the souls that made themselves the vessels of the divine spirit. The allegory of turning water into wine also belongs to the same phenomena, because *aqua permanens* can take different forms but always retains its essence, somewhat similar to waves of different sizes never ceasing to be water. In its absolute quality, it is known as the Vedic soma, the drink of *amrita* or immortality. The same meaning is ascribed to the alchemical elixir of life, which preparation was based on the so-called "radical moisture" or simply, dew, considered to be the most natural, purest water on earth. Blood is thicker than water, and it is also vital liquid, red living water pumped through all warm-blooded organisms and blue, green, and yellow in many cold-blooded creatures. As there is bad water, there is bad blood; moreover, one can characterize the blood as old and young, cold and boiling, anemic and strong, wise and bloody foolish.

In the context of personal metamorphoses, the activated water element can bring us closer to our basic feelings; we might be flooded by them, or swim out to their sea, and come back like the moon reappearing from behind the clouds. Sensitive people can feel utterly alone in a sea of faces passing by, but living in detachment and solitude in their own "personal aquarium," so to speak, will not guarantee them emotional security either. The water force draws man into his own vortex making him experience its depth, rather than

merely thinking about it or philosophizing on the ontological quandary of life. Certainly, an intelligent individual can talk about it with assurance and elegance; literature is abundant



V. G., *Watery Pronouncement Jan. 18, 88.*
How did you get in there, Bura-Le? Confused
Le, Superior of Bura-Le. (From his book *The
Pronouncements* written for Rimma, nick-
named Bura-Le, the Pisces-born.)

with various suggestions on how to liberate your tied-up energy and feel as fine as fish in water. Even then one cannot be entirely right, merely right from one's point of view, and that might not be convincing, as in the case of the illustrious actress Sarah Bernhardt, old and one-legged, yet adamant on

playing Hamlet. What we want to say is that a bright and knowledgeable individual, resting beside the TV panorama of external things and clever thoughts, who has not passed, allegorically speaking, through the vortex of the water element, grasps everything only by his natural faculties and rather dimly distinguishes good from bad. Identity – clothes that make the man – is quite a mutable thing it changes depending on circumstances or phases of the moon. There is no way for higher intelligence to manifest to one who has not washed out what is too sensual and physical.

When the water element begins to rise, people are caught up in uncertainty about themselves, gradually becoming mood-

Seaworthy © 2000





Leaking Veil © 2001

ier. As time goes on, making them too weary of the chaos within, they might be ready to part with their ailing self-righteousness. The psychological factors behind turbulent events usually appear in unison with a personal emotional crisis, throwing a man out of his water element like fish on dry land. His emotions become circumspect and self-protecting, ready for refinement, which in simple laundry terms, would be like pushing his senses through a wash-rinse-dry cycle. After experiencing what might be called “heavy waters,” one usually knows and acknowledges the traits of one’s character with almost fatalistic equanimity. In mythological traditions, that washing procedure assumes the

form of taking a cleansing bath in a great river, symbolic of the birth of a self-confidence independent of the world's censure, praise, and blame, as well as its elaborated complex of gross values. Rituals with many similar features of immersion and ablution are known across cultures and throughout the ages.

We only can guess what may or may not happen next: whether an individual with refined senses is admitted to the next stage of awareness or not. The mystical properties of the water element make it part of many mysteries. In most cases, the initiation by water represents only the first step, being merely the purification in preparation for receiving the essen-

Vessel © 2001



tial knowledge. For the vessel that is to be filled with the new substance – in this case, understanding and possibly wisdom – must be empty and clean of the worldly pursuits of pleasures. To show how the four elements influence that process, we would shorten their description into a couple of sentences. Water sinks, washes, and regenerates; fire burns into ashes and revives in a phoenix-like mode – therefore true bathing must be in fire. Then, air infuses the spirit, to which earth gives form. The earth is a ground for the entire process; it gives expression to ideas; it shapes earthborn forms of everything, supplying life to life. Earth is the salt of it.

Stirring the ghosts of a millennium, we might refer here

Researcher © 1997



to the Eleusinian mysteries, which had a considerable pause between the water and the fire “bathing” or the lesser and the greater mysteries, because one might be “unprepared for oneself.” The candidate had to be free of discord, be virtuous and very intelligent, intelligent without learning, thus capable of grasping things that were quite beyond him, or rather, beyond his refined intellect. If one longs for wisdom, craving it very much like a hungry man longs for food, one may be admitted, metaphorically speaking, to the blessed 1% of fresh water separated from the remaining 99% of salty oceans and ice. That seems to be the proportion of the initiated souls (knowing something about the unknowable) to the rest of the world.

Cone © 2000





Offering © 1999

Whether we focus on pagan Hellenistic culture, Christian traditions, look at the Levant, or travel to the East as far as the banks of the Ganges, the baptismal water containing the blissful promise was, and perhaps still is, a helpful element in life, washing the believers clean of immediate troubles. In popular belief, plunging into fresh water, the bath in which was the symbol of purification, a new convert was washing his soul clean of all wrongdoings. In hermetic lore, water is an emblem of the soul, and however contaminated it might seem, it always remains pure in its essence. Naturally, in that context, we must have in mind not the regular water but water in its transcendental essence, the *aqua permanens*.

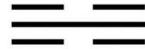


Blooming River © 1999

That aqua is supposed to fill the baptismal font, symbolizing both the tomb and the womb: the death for the earthly life and the birth in life eternal. So it was said. Perhaps poets who yet know how to live in a world of prose could explain it better than we, visual artists. We use symbols of water in its mystical undercurrent in our picture language; however, the meaning of the symbolical font could be taken only according to one's inner disposition and fantasy. For it might be envisioned in various ways, as a fountain of astral water and light issued out of an invisible source, or less extraordinarily, as for example, Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha found his baptismal font in the river (of events), which water "continually

flowed and flowed and yet every moment was new."

The water element in Chinese tradition is so deep that one would never hear a stone hit bottom. In the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*), the abysmal waters are symbolized by the trigram, in which a spark from heaven indicated by the strong yang line is imprisoned in the waters of the two yielding yin lines.



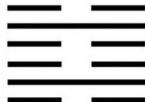
This projection of a fire spark into the bitter waters of existence is similar to the period of training known in Buddhism as concentrating in "the chamber of fire in the

Embryo © 1997



mystery of water.” The old orient saw certain effective measures in the abysmal situations used for the disciplinary practices, such as developing and cultivating the yang force among the destructive waters of life attributed to the yin. (We venture to add that sometimes the worst difficulties conceal the best opportunities.) Gradually, the yin waters must burn themselves out. What is symbolized here is a necessity to constrain the flawed watery nature of a soul by the illumination of fire-warmed intuition. Contradiction seems to be the criterion. Nature itself gives us an example of a combustive situation involving fire and water: the phenomenon of lightning during a storm. They come together in a frightening crescendo; and at the end of their high performance, after the gloomy tension in nature, they bring a release, clearing the air. One of the aquatic mysteries, the electric eel, lives in unique harmony of its cold blood versus its hot current: it can discharge bursts of 625 volts, 40 times a second. An interesting fact to ponder over is that humanity learned what electricity is millennia later after the electric eel “intuited” how to employ it.

If the water element is too excessive, too yin, one is in danger of the irrational that might besiege one with senselessness or adverse events that evoke heavy dark emotions resounding from the unconscious. Their accumulation is denoted in the *I Ching* by the doubling of the water trigram in the 29th hexagram titled *The Abysmal*.



There are several ways to explain this hexagram, which might be linked to extreme negativity, meanness, or something of this kind; but we will not go into it, and will concentrate rather on the mainly esoteric aspects of the dangerous preponderance of the water element. Water must break through when approaching a barrier and can do it with a violent shock. In a psychological parallel, the individual is pulled into the emotional abyss of the unholy or, in exceptionally rare cases, holy madness with the ecstasy of emotions. The stream of psychic energy, its bloodstained water, is hard to tame when, as the psalmist put it, “there is no

sure standing... for the waters have come in unto my soul... I have come into the deep waters; where the floods overflow me." (Ps. 69:1-2) The psychotic episodes and the borderline cases are usually provoked by an overexcited unconscious, which even being full of wisdom, as the psychoanalysts suggest, is watered down with irrationality. In other words, in the trial by water, the "swimmer" is not in possession of wisdom – he is possessed by it and often not in a wholesome way.

There are two main approaches to a crisis: an active one, when "it is auspicious to cross great waters," as I Ching phrases it, and a quiet one, following the advice attributed to Lao-Tzu, "Muddy water, let stand, becomes clear." Both ways are well known in the oriental practices. If the Taoists

Waterfall © 1993,
photos, metal



clinging to the mystery of water (their fire is water), the Buddhists cultivate mental concentration in the “chamber of fire,” denoted by the fire trigram.

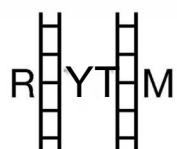


Sandwiched between the two yang lines, the yin ceases to be dangerous. The fire trigram signifies awareness, conscious knowledge, and energy – everything is in control, but most importantly, the fire and water relationship is in harmony: logic isn’t against impulse, head isn’t against heart, and mind isn’t against matter. Water is calm while fire is not drying up the senses.

Plexus © 1999



Everything is in flux in nature, and no balance can endure. But the rhythm in the oscillation between water and fire, as in fact between everything, can be maintained. According to human logic, the plus cannot also be the minus, so it is with the concord and the discord, but their equilibrium is quite possible. If endured it can secure progress through the hierarchical levels of awareness. To visualize this effort as if it was a diagram from the marine dictionary (not overly irrelevant to the water element), we would outline it as a rope H-ladder.



In myths and apocryphal scriptures, the narrow path to wisdom winds up and down and between raging fire on one side and deep water on the other, which is a kind of hybrid of

Balance © 1999



the clashing stones and Scylla and Charybdis of the Ancient Greeks. That passage is so narrow and dangerous that only one person at a time can sneak between the water and fire, meaning that each one has to strictly go about their quest individually, alone in isolation and solitude. All group methods become obsolete and cannot be of vital help; that is why Ulysses lost all his crew and at a certain point of his adventure had to proceed alone.

In our art, fire assumed a rich variety of forms. Long before an overview of the entire transitional process became available to us, we glimpsed at it through small openings. These glimpses, like fire sparks, kindled our enthusiasm. Even though the sparks emitted relatively small energy content, they nevertheless stimulated some premonition, vague and uncertain at the time, but were slowly preparing us for the incorruptible realm of the general that transcends the linear picture of daily life. In *Photoglyphs*, the fire was simply painted on the face and on the hands; it “coiled” around the hair dyed red and raised up as tongues of flames.

In *Volcano*, fire appears as the violently powerful red lava rising through the tenebrous intermediate state of subconsciousness (both of nature and man) and erupting into the upper regions. The influx from the below invokes (or might invoke) the influx from the above that will be a catalyst for further development. To picture it geomorphically, it is when one seismic stress outdoes the other by rolling the rock back from the cave and freeing the buried alive souls of the previous eruption. As to personal volcanic activity, there are moments when one feels like turning into heat and pulsation, as if your Sun turns into somebody's Mars, meaning that the “sunshine” of your mental activity is processed through the Martian heat of irrepressible emotional intensity. Traditionally, Ares (Mars for the Romans) is associated with the picture of violent war, lacking the good strategy characteristic of Athena, goddess of intelligence. The violent outbursts in nature can be equally applied to the volcanic episodes in social structure and the psychosomatic domain of the human organism. In the latter case, all our beliefs, values, and needs might be severely affected by the disruption and psychological trauma. The natural inference is that mental lava must be transformed into a flexible fluid before it can be poured into new molds.



Volcano © 1990

One can be accustomed to living on a mental volcano, learning what to do to escape serious injury during the passionate eruptions. No matter how distressing they might be to the daring individual who certainly does not plan them, though involuntarily happens to kick stones into its crater. On each unhappy occasion, he has to rely on his gradually maturing mind to prevent the disastrous effects. What does one usually face in the social environment at that point? The emergence from the group situation (call it "collective thinking" or "social jungle") is a primary event, a barely perceptible, insecure act still cloaked with the remnants of the past. When a "raw" man gets the fiery impulse meant to increase his awareness, his unrestrained enthusiasm may evolve into a passion. It is impossible to be immune to the pressure of the volcanic abyss which depths the diver would be attempting to measure.

In Gnosticism, the crater symbolizes the mixing vessel for the outer and inner transformation of the psyche, kind of a womb of spiritual renewal. In such an acute situation (of burning psychic impurities), the limitation in mundane practical thinking always helps. With all its reality of thought and efficacy of choice, pragmatism easily leads to the security of the most trapping kind. The well-constructed thought edifice does not shield either. Moreover, your intellectual mind can hit you on your own head, meaning that a quick tongue with a taste for shielding sarcasm will merely incur an extra hostility. In any way, people of advanced intelligence never waste its strength in a permanent and unjust war with their environ-

Sun Crater © 1994,
photo, metal





Agni © 1995,
photo, metal

ment. Often held back by insecurity and occasional fits of fear and irritation, the individuals lingering in the transitional state of the fire element try to keep their thoughts positive, sharpening their senses by an awareness, which they cannot explain. Fire leads to knowledge extracted from matter.

If Adam is not casting the blame on Eve, to call on the gender archetypes, his fire as anguish, effort, and conflict can be pacified by water helping to resolve the troubles and put all gradually (sometimes instantly) at ease. Finding the right attitude, the feminine nature akin to flowing water, smooth and tender, can put the inflamed masculine mind to the service of a heart, thus placating male instinct, his powers as

a warrior, whose seethe and boil in fire begins to subside. Gradually, his heat and temperamental wilderness change to a cool enough sensitivity. After the fire ceases to be dangerous, peaceful irrigation revives dried earth, freshens the air, and restores the balance between the four elements.

In the mythological scene, the play presenting this fire-water relationship is enacted by Ares and Aphrodite, whose daughter bears the self-explanatory name Harmonia. However, no permanent balance endures in nature, and at a certain point, her harmony becomes the reverse of promising. In that sense, Harmonia's destiny might serve as an example of the pathetic discrepancy between what one aspires to and what fate allows one to achieve. The husband of Aphrodite, the celestial smith Hephaestus (Venus and Vulcan in Roman equivalent), who was enraged by his wife's illicit affair with Ares, presented Harmonia a bride robe infused with all kinds of misfortunes, thus making her pay for her mother's exploits. In deep-rooted myths, all happens of necessity hence the "disharmonizing" of Harmonia is not a merely vindictive episode, but suggests that harmony could be only temporal – an unstable result reached in the early stages of the anima-animus correlation. To go deeper than that, we might point out that we all are born with certain innate traits, our "penalties" and "rewards" inherited in our genes, some brought over from our personal karma, some from the karma of our family, our nation, the whole world, and life in general. All of them must be balanced if one is to achieve a permanent harmony.

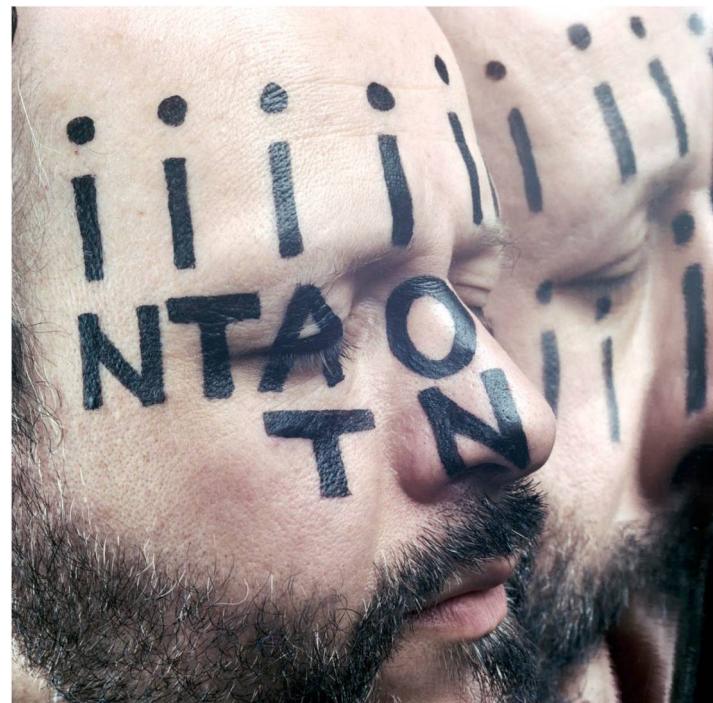
In passing, we would like to add that the bloodlines of the Olympic family reflect the "intermarriages" of the elements. For example, the Titaness, or rather goddess of justice Themis, is the daughter of Uranus (sky, air) and Gaia (earth) and, according to Aeschylus, she is the mother of Prometheus who brought fire to mankind. Tracing a gender gap in the fire-water correlation, we might say that fire expresses a paternal principle while water is maternal, both affecting each other in a reciprocal and complimentary way. Thus, in times of emotional flooding, the fiery "breath" can control the overflowing emotions, setting on fire the hearts that are drowned in a sea of feelings and matter. If the water is too dark and oppressive, the counteraction has to be equally strong, sometimes even taking the form of a revolt or, much

better, a steady mind action, as in the case of Heracles, who dispelled the darkness of Hydra by exposing it to the scorching sun. To avoid turning our observations into a homily on the conduct of heroes and gods reflected in human relationships, we also have to understand them between a pair of random persons assigned to a random world. If anima and animus live too close to their instinctual natures, their expressions are somewhat linear. He could be a hothead and a matter-of-fact thinking type while she, a merely feeling person, would be markedly deficient in logic – both are lacking the essential balance. Normally, the water-fire vacillation between

Themis © 1996



anima and animus happens mainly at the psychological level while the spiritual level presents an additional internal conflict. It develops not only between the elemental forces but within each of them, seemingly dividing each element against itself while deliberately exposing its contrariety concealed



Initiation © 1990

within its homogenous quality.

In the context of the initiation practices, going through them is known as the baptism by water and by fire. In reference to them, we use not only picture language of art but also the words "of this world," trying to exalt them above their secular meaning, as in the image *Initiation*, which reverberates with the mirror's reflections. Structurally, the initiations by each of the four elements are identical: during the first stage, after the preliminary purification, one receives the gift of contemplative illumination characteristic to the particular

element; the second stage brings difficult trials (“purgation” would be a correct word for it); while at the third stage, the spirit is vivified and uplifted. The sequence is much similar to the Hegelian formula of thesis > antithesis > syntheses.

In spite of the identical structures, the concrete methods, situations, and applied elemental “materials” differ noticeably. In purgation by water, one is drawn into the vortex of feelings, while in purgation by fire, one is crashed by wrath, helpless anger, and mental self-devouring. The elemental forces perform their task somewhat similar to the waves: they advance and withdraw, increase and decrease, while gradually pushing one towards overcoming one’s inner demons, be

Chaos © 1990, photo, stainless steel, diameter 122 cm



they of the watery senses or the fiery mind. In the ongoing coherent process, the baptism by fire follows the baptism by water, sanctifying it and moving the entire process from one ontological plane to another, from the vibratory level of the refined senses to the mental-spiritual zone. Of the latter, the Gospel of Thomas says, "He who is near me is near the fire." (82)

What is the material fire and how much is it material? Fire is the most mysterious of the four elements: having an incorporeal nature, it is almost of a cosmic kind. It does not diminish like water and earth when we take it from it. The fire that we see in nature, so-called "*ignis naturalis*" is always in

Water Flask © 1998





Athena © 1997

a state of transformation and changing the combination of matter; in itself, it is also a process of recombination. Fire is whatever shines, warms, cooks, burns, and transforms; its symbolic color is flaming red. It is the only one of the four Greek elements, which no animal inhabits unless you count the mythical salamanders. Inflaming and all-conquering, fire can cut deep into the structure of matter. By fire, metal can be molded, hammered, and cast. In the past, making or forging a sword in fire was accompanied by rituals, particularly important for Japanese samurais.

If the four elements are forms of matter, fire is the most transitional of them. Precisely that quality of fire has given

ground for phlogiston theory (phlox is “flame” in Greek), that was accepted for several centuries. For phlogiston was considered a principle of fire rather than a material substance, that is the fire released during combustion, which in effect is the hybrid of the air and the fire elements. For alchemist Robert Fludd, fire was nothing else but “air extremely dilated.” Later that combination was linked to hydrogen (inflammable air), constituting 75% of the plasmic mass in our universe, as astrophysicists inform us. With its atomic number 1, hydrogen, which chemical symbol is H, is the first and the lightest element in the periodic table. Perhaps, after all, the concept of phlogiston was not entirely misleading.

Cathodes © 1997





Psyche © 1997

As to our visual concepts employing the fire element, their crystallization was the result of our psychological experience that accumulated, classified itself, and reappeared in art forms. When in the mid-1990s the real flame replaced the picturesque seismic scenes depicted on our faces, it was clear that the fire element became the prime subject of our thrilling interest. Theoretically, the images refer to the mystical probability of the fire element that might become "real" at the psychological level. Down to the last details, the concepts are tantalizingly brisk in condensing aphoristic ideas to visual signals. Against the black background, the flame seems to play a similar role as the lights the miners wear when moving

up and down in the darkness of the choking shafts.

Varied as they are, the images of the fire series share a common technical peculiarity. We photographed the burning candles employing multiple exposures that gave us certain elusiveness in the expression of the inner light finding its way in a physical state as a kind of lightness in the body and in the air. For getting around the problem with the use of art, the works were made to embody the most abstract mythological concepts in the living characters. One more photographic method proved to be useful for clothing our concepts in symbolic imagery, that is drawing with flame. Going up and down in the air, the glowing strokes of flame represented not

Branching © 1997



so much the fire element as the fire-heated intention behind the images directed to the inexpressible mystical concepts, in so far, they are inexpressible. Making drawings in the air with the candlelight and flashlight at a slow shutter speed looked like writing magic signs, similar to those with which magi exorcized the demons. Perhaps on a subconscious level, these spectral drawings also shielded us from something inexpressible, from things better left unsaid. The flame assumed different guises in our photographs: it appeared as a personal beacon in the *Bark* lost in open water (p. 54), as the flaming wings of *Psyche* (p. 319), the burning pillow (p. 346) put under the metal blanket, or a torch made of a “phallic” finger in

Sundial © 1997



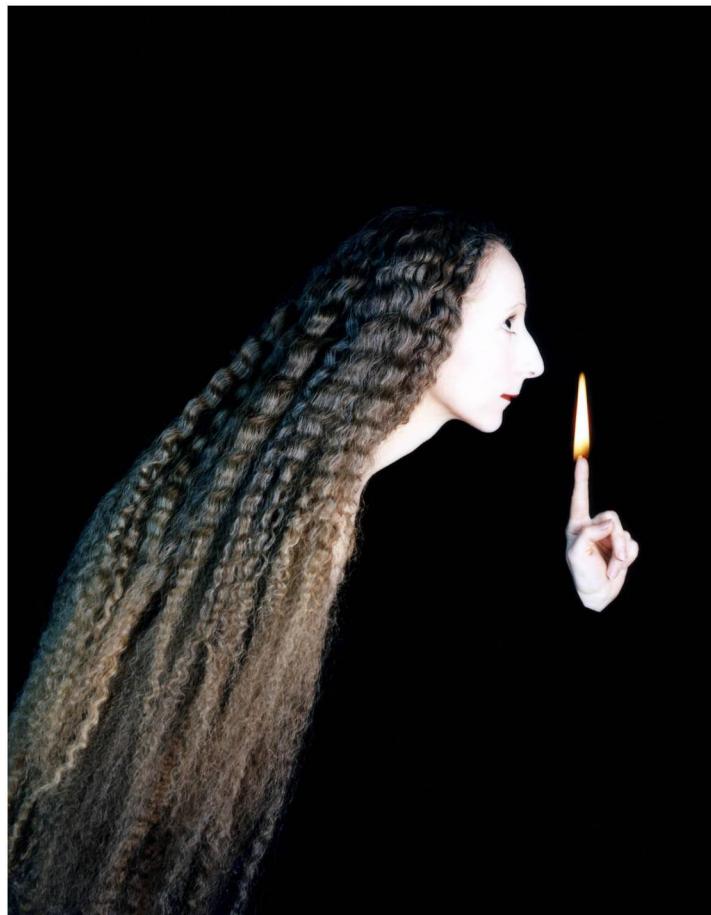
Candle, lighted in pitch darkness. This particular image was one of the initial sparks in that series, and perhaps the most informative.

The alarming darkness around the solitary light of that candle represents everything and nothing: as if knowing you are not alone in your house (or in your mind) where you believe you are. In the early stage of the departure from the normal life or, rather, its congeniality, the solitude is not so overbearing, while in the adventurous mystic experience, an isolating trip into the darkness makes one's existence strange even to oneself. Courage is required to progress into the unknown, wherein seeking an abode in solitude, one creates one's own world, not less dangerous than the one outside. On the intensely black, velvety background of *Candle*, the flaming finger seems to hover in the air, not so much adding light to the picture as highlighting the darkness by contrast. The radiance of one enlightening moment can make everything else appear too dark. Soothing away the depressing effect of darkness with the balm of inner peace, the determined soul presses forwards and upwards while burning with a steady flame. The updraft makes its own weather. The tense position of the figure gives an impression of the complete singleness of its purpose. To justify the metaphor of the finger-flame, we might say that a mystical void can be confronted with glittering frenzy and fierce delight – thrilling to one's fingertips. More than once, that mysterious state was depicted in literature that could redouble the darkness with its tropes. St. John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz), the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, vividly described it in his opus *The Dark Night of the Soul* (*La noche oscura del alma*), both in prose and in poetry:

“Blest night of wandering
In secret, when by none might I be spied,
Nor I see anything;
Without a light to guide
Save that which in my heart burnt in my side.”⁵⁸

This emotionally charged stanza talks of simple “facts” of faith, enduring in spite of its past-tense language for a modern audience. In due course, each searching soul learns that it gets to be aware of God by His occasional absence,

however discouraging it may sound. Arming oneself with the torch of faith, one can rely only on one's inner capacity. In the darkness, a single candle might be an intimate source of light,



Candle © 1997

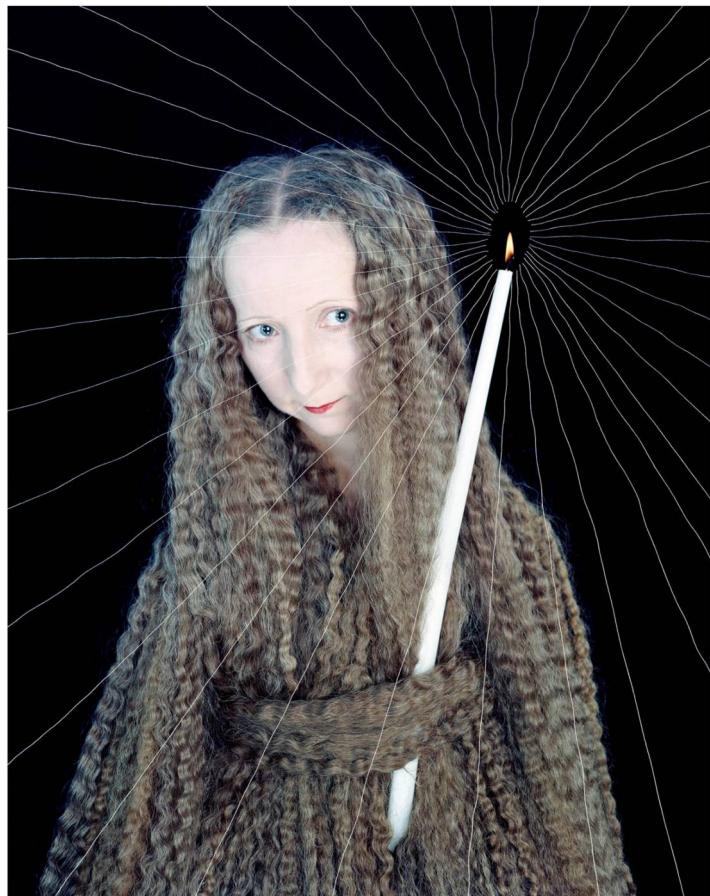
speaking not of illumination without but the flame within. In a certain mystic sense, our fire images are “fleshing out” somewhat similar ideas, exploring the anatomy of the soul by a prime act of imagination. We experimented with live fire in correlation to our faces indexing different mindsets – our thoughts were actually the things to be observed. Building

the images from inside out, we employed long hair, the hair of a woman seemingly not fully in this world. The lonely figures with flaming limbs and the bodies aspiring for minimized gravity behave as if they are made up of potentialities. How close to immateriality the body can be? In real life, the body with its allotted lifespan dissolves rather quickly, while its artist-created image can linger. However, all that is changeable will change when its time has passed. Gradually losing their imagined reality, all artworks will eventually fade phantom-like into something that no longer is. *Ars longa, vita brevis*, but art is also not an *imperium sine fine* (an empire without end), in fact, the ending makes all equal. To minimize or even nullify the end-to-end process, one might try to imagine never being born.

Aware of the ephemeral status of all that is created and our own images in particular, we wanted them to look somewhat weightless and to some extent homeless. Thinning out the ground under their feet, we left them half-suspended in the obscure darkness. Not only the fire element but also a certain visual frequency unites this entire series. Usually, the faces are shown in sharp profiles, emphasizing the intensity of expression, aspiration, and clearness of purpose that vividly contrasts with the previous series of works with the water element characterized by the soft gentleness of “full-moon faces” bathed in visionary waters. Now, we are in the territory of the fire element: fire in its role of a splendid and brutal donor of energy both frightens and gives some invisible source of support. This “dark night of the soul” is as much a leap in the mystical pyre as faith itself. Glimpses of revelation help those going through the darkness, which, in vernacular, is just an environment of unenlightened existence that can be pictured in various ways, the black background including, as if all that is extraneous is wiped off the map. To a great extent, that is due to many complications coming from one’s immediate surroundings crippled by the common sense that conforms to everything that the deteriorating society with its flimsy moral codes might suggest. Whether with unnatural worth or natural worthlessness, an individual of high integrity inevitably feels that for him such a networking game is not worth the candle. And the candles, that’s what we used to create the air of mystery in the network of our “fire warning” signs and little tricks of self-deceptive artistry.

One might spiritualize the dangerous flames of senses, transforming them into a noble fire of aspiration, but it does not change the simple fact learned by everyone in babyhood – if you put your finger into the fire it gets burned. Aside of poetic and metaphysical definitions of fire, we have to point out its threefold psychophysical symbolism as illuminating, purging, and vivifying principles, which are subjective equivalents to the objective forms of the manifestation of fire – its light-giving, burning, and warming ways of expression. In our photographic “tests” involving fire, we tried to unite its subjective and objective forms, bringing transpersonal force

In the Belt © 2005





Wired Candle © 2005

into the embodied forms with more or less understandable associations with regular life. When the thinly elongated figures clothed in hair carry candles and torches or burn their own limbs, they speak not only of the secret fire but also demonstrate its basic operations perhaps weirdly, but to the point enough. All is within the framework of the fine arts and its visual hermeneutics, which parameters allow to shift these correspondences from level to level, say, from candle to its symbol. Let one more example shed some light on that assumption. What shall we do when the power goes out in our house? We have to have a candle always ready. In analogy, but supposedly with no limits, in the many mansions



Reflector © 2006

of the celestial house, the stars, the “candles of the night”⁵⁹ as Shakespeare saw them, give us subtle light in the darkness of the night. They guide us through the pre-dawn darkness. The mystical light might be seen both at the pre-dawn beginning and after the sunset ends, when at the moment of death, it will leap up one last time like a candle-flame, giving us a glimpse of the invisible void.

If we are to point to the spiritual reality behind natural fire, we must emphasize its symbolic connection with the mind, decorated in literary works with many fiery epithets. Literary characters may catch their brains on fire, make fiery speeches, start blasts with their rapid-fire minds ticking like a

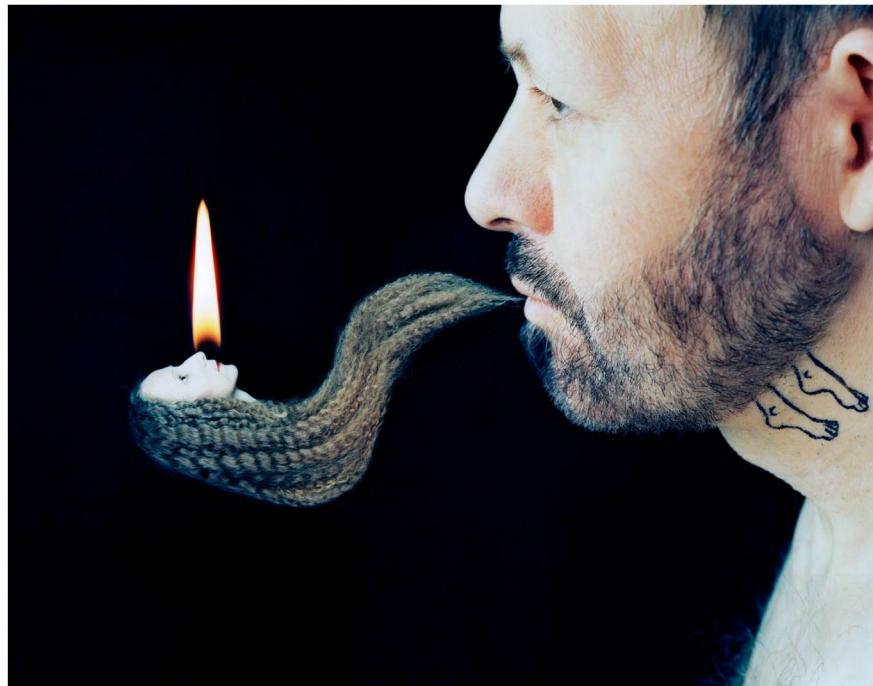
a bomb, and so on. Besides, one may reverse the metaphors, saying that the flame has a mind of its own. The fire element that is wielded by the characters with an aggressive disposition and mental impertinence tend to be hostile and dangerous, while fire as a life-giving element is typical for the warm and passionate personalities, fervent lovers, and indomitable spirits. What interests us here is the mental fire that leads an integrated thought process. There is a vast difference between the standard thought process that never interrupts its involuntary activity for a single instance, and the integrated thinking that is not automatic and cannot be distracted by random attractions and thousands of stimuli scattering the mind in all directions. The fine, precise mind ignores what is trivial, cannot be consumed by personal memories, and never loses its way in the whirling vapors of worries. The fire element is a fulcrum, by meditation on which the integrated mind can understand its basic principle in life, kindled and sustained by fire, by its warmth and heat. The sharpness and swiftness of that kind of mind are especially potent in darkness and solitude. As long as it burns, psychic fire illuminates and gives direct knowledge and lucidity of vision, but only on the condition that the impetuous passions of the dark fire are extinguished.

The controlling mind must be perfectly clear and calm to withstand the test of fire, thus acquiring the philosophical and mystical insight characteristic of this element. The psychic fire at its peak expression is serenely calm and concentrated, however contradictory it may seem. If in a moment of a peak experience the balance of one's flowing watery nature and rising fiery spirit is severely disturbed by harsh occurrences, one can fall like Icarus. To prevent the risk of this polarization, many try to find their security in self-possession and mental peace void of any extremes. In what way? One method of overcoming the obstacles is to practice conscious observation that helps to withdraw behind your thoughts, finding a quiet place in your own mind. The mind trained in these practices never loses its capacity for self-judgment. In outward appearance, that would be a man of few words and he could not be expected to display his wit and reasoning – his face becomes an index of his mind. The power of collecting one's thoughts with conviction and reasoning, relatively easily finds its support in silent spiritual

aspiration that, for its part, brings sufficient comfort and tolerance, probity and gentleness in the approach to all matters. One hardly can find an equanimity without a considerable amount of solitude and composure.

Reverting to the art that reflects this focused, calm, and rational state, it is just hard not to notice that such depictions come up often in paintings and photographs usually in images of men with magnificent, stable profiles, who are lordly and impressive, as if they are carved in the cliffside. To offer an excuse for that cliché, we should say that the wiring of a human mind, with its enormous number of functions working in parallel, is very complex and cannot be depicted unambiguously and understandable to everyone. Bearing this in mind, we did not look for portraiture but for the expression of thoughtfulness, linking invisibly to the essence of man's experience of consciousness. In the image *Smoking Pipe*, featuring the relaxed smoker in profile, the fire element exhibits

Smoking Pipe © 1997



its feminine aspect. Absorbed in thinking, he, to bypass the formal name, is calmly smoking his pipe, filled not with tobacco, but literally animated with the feminine spirit breathing out a streak of flame. No pipe smoke is floating around, no suspended grey with a tinge of blue is going up in evanescent smoke; just one small tongue of flame contributes, however symbolically, to the expression of mental stillness and peace of mind.

There is a play of concord and discord not only between the elements but also within each of them. Regarding the fire duality, it has outer and inner aspects, and not only, it can also be sensual and spiritual, heavenly and infernal. Working on *Intimate Candle*, we found ourselves thinking about the complementary relation between its inner and outer expressions, depicting them in a somewhat magical way. The drawing of a non-existent candle, made on the palm and continued on the body, gives the real light – the small intimate tongue of flame.

At Bonfire © 1999





Intimate Candle © 1997

The unreal produces the real – art lies to speak the truth. But how could we learn what the truth is, beyond the obvious? The obvious is usually half-truth, easily converted into half-lie and then into the whole one and again into half-truth presentable as a ready-made truth and so on – all of the results are reversible as seasonal syndromes. To quote Pilate, “What is truth?” One can hold one’s own arbitrary ideas about it, but there may be more truths than one. Perhaps that can explain why a non-existent candle burns with the real flame.

Hopefully, one has enough experience to appreciate such enigmatic light because something inside us, some in-



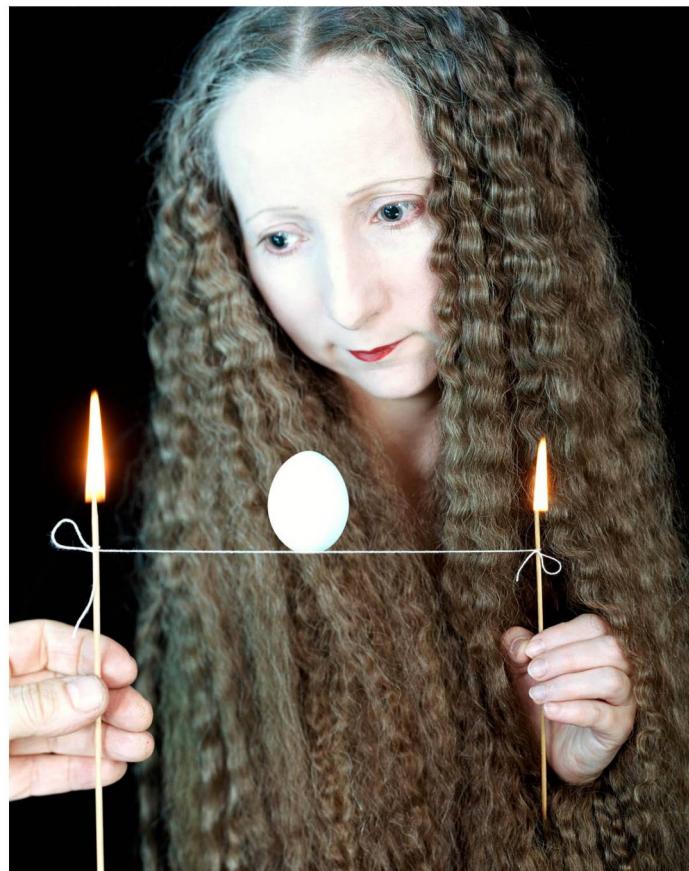
Finger Flame © 2001

timate light must be secure and sacred within, inextinguishable by the outside world of changes. Witnessing the constant flow of nature around us, its agony and its almost animal joy in existence, and not to be swallowed by it, one has to develop an ability to withstand nature's pleasures and emergencies. For in our search for certainty we intuitively fight for the best within us, in the sense of true worth and right will, not relying on our physical inheritance from nature and optimistic trust in our fellow man. That is why all essential doctrines suggest looking inside yourself, promising that the fire of aspiration will lead man towards his home. A cheerful thought, but we don't know, or perhaps can't remember,

where our home is. Rather than using long-winded arguments on the potential destination, it seems to be enough to settle for calling it “home” without pondering on the transcendental meaning of it. And the fire of aspiration, which is not that easy to acquire and even more difficult to preserve, is not less questionable: as much as it is genuinely ardent, it can fill one with sensation half stunned, half like falling through space, through the dark landscape created by one’s own burnt imagination.

We can picture the inner fire, or whatever we may mean by it, as a timid little flame, carefully concealed, as it is in *Intimate Candle* or *Ignition*, which backgrounds are empty of

Between Two Lights © 2003



every object. If there are green woods or noisy streets remaining in our imagination, they are invisible; the black nothingness hides them within its ontological void. To receive the inner light, one needs emptiness and silence, as in *Ignition* featuring the white profile across a negative black space. In the absolute blackness, one can feel being anywhere, any time, empty and still – and be sheltered from the world. A promising idea, but is it within our reach? If this state is achieved, the fire element begins its transformative process accelerating one's karma for its quicker dissolution. Aesthetizing various qualities of the fire, we feel that evoking a near-mystical resonance is hard to describe making the usual

Ignition © 1997



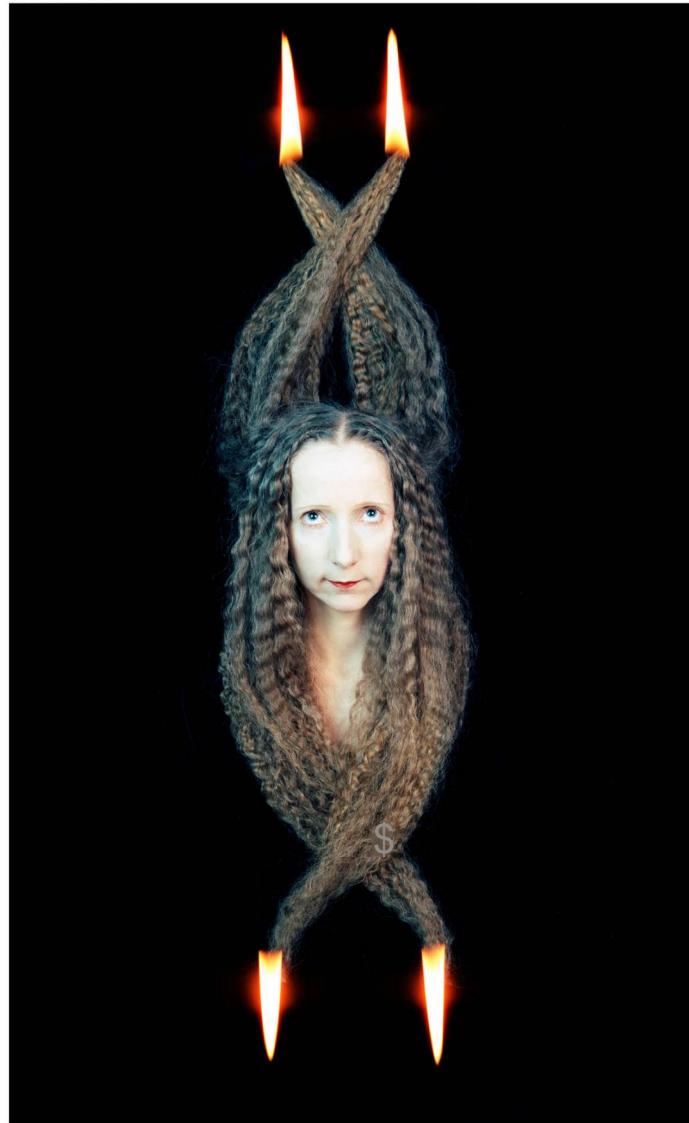
verbal sense of words. How else can we explain that “awfully” magnificent state except by using the poetic images and similar metaphors? Developing psychic fire within can open an inner link to the sacred that one can track only inwardly. As a mild transition is followed by a violent transition, especially in the context of fire, everyone touching it faces the inevitable contradiction. In outward appearance, fire might dry all inner senses to one’s dismay and frustration, but moral endurance in spite of accumulated negative experience and inevitable signs of aging can kindle some new flame of devotion. As the faithful say, if the heart has not dried up, it can be opened to grace.

Theoretical Alchemy © 1997



The mystic fire rises from fire to fire, upgrading the awareness and realization of what it is – the indwelling fire in its universal and psychic meaning. As the essence of water, the essence of fire is transcendental, manifesting in its igniting creative force. Essential fire does not burn like *ignis naturalis*; similarly, *aqua permanens* does not flow like water as we know it. The sacred fire is not mixed with earth and matter, yet it is a principle and condition of life because it exists in all that exists, while the natural fire belongs to the world of phenomena in the existential condition. And yet, there is one fire, and we all use it. To grasp the essence of it in its meta- and physical unity is to grasp the infinity of fiery processes going on in each organism and spreading throughout the universe. For the lives of those who are able to discover, absorb, and utilize the objective principles of fire in their body and soul are remarkable and of great significance. “All is burning,” the Buddha stated repeatedly.

In theological version, the holy or heavenly fire is the gods’ fire that burns in love, consuming everything. Burning with the fiery love, seraphim are said to be the closest to the Godhead. At the same time, all angels are in warmth in proportion to their acceptance of divine love. Each creature takes part in the pulsating fiery network of lives subsisting on heat, animating, vivifying, and invigorating them. The Eastern roots of the fire element are also of the divine substance: an entire world, with stars, men, vegetation, and everything else, is generated by the inner heat of the Vedic creator. The vivid picture of it is given in the Rigveda telling how Prajapati created the world by heating himself to an extreme temperature through asceticism.⁶⁰ From the fire, life begins, to the fire it returns. Draupadi, the main female character of Mahabharata was born out of the fire. The Indian fire deity Agni (our “ignition” is of an etymological lineage of his name meaning “fire”), whose task was to lead men to the gods, was called the sacrificer, the sacrificed, and the sacrificial fire: all three in one person. Agni is fire on earth, lightning in the air, and the sun in the sky. There are pictures unverified by any fact, which recur continually in different creeds, like the repeating symbols of dreams. Their immateriality may look deceptive yet conveys true messages, which assortment does not feel made, but rather feels found. At least we thought so while composing our images using real or symbolic fire. Most



Fiery Seraph © 1997

likely, we were receiving them as numinous approximations filtered through our art-oriented psyches.

The essence of fire pervades the entire cosmos: 99.9% of the universe is made of plasma, considered the fourth state of matter, in addition to gas, liquid, and solid states of matter,



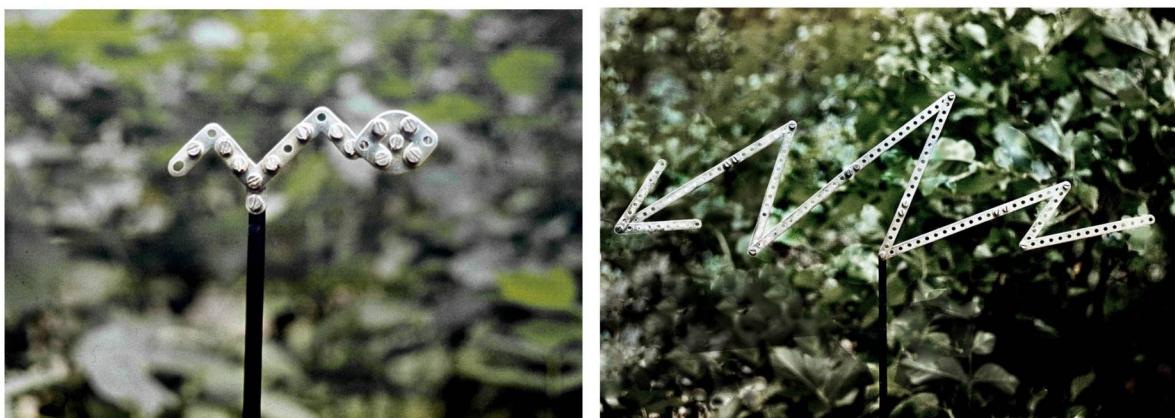
Flat Plane © 1997

in addition to gas, liquid, and solid states of matter. Our Sun is a giant ball of hot plasma. The astrophysical plasma behaves like an ionized gas, carrying a magnetic field and electric current, so we learn from the reputable sources. We have no intention to intrude the territory of the science facing the overriding question of what the universe is made of; as artists, we prefer to refer to its mythological meaning, rather than putting the actual data in the picture. The fiery rain of Zeus is one of the metaphors for the heavenly fire, which is particularly interesting because of its additional euphemism for the seminal fluid. In a creative way, it also relates to fire seen as a fecundating spark of the masculine creative force, the male libido fire. A bolt of lightning and a spermatozoon can be viewed in equal ratio to each other as objective and subjective forces symbolically showing the same penetrating, fiery power of nature: one demonstrated in the sky, the other in the human organism. Their energy is stored in the phenom-

enal universe in a state of non-existence for our physical senses. Light sparks turn into the flame, so it is with Zeus' sparks initiating countless dramatic personae of the classic mythology: gods, goddesses, heroes, and their proliferating offspring. Even some philosophers could be added to that line, in which Empedocles would be the most exquisite example. Credited with immense prodigious intellectual power, he eventually became convinced in his divine origin, which he tried to validate by plunging into the boiling lava of Etna. The justifications of his bold deed, varied as they are, show certain regularity having a common basis in the classical tradition. Socrates and Seneca also willingly accepted their death; and Horace declared, "Poets have the right to destroy themselves," having in mind Empedocles. Centuries later, Matthew Arnold poeticized his death in his poem *Empedocles on Etna*, which is particularly interesting in the context of the four elements:

"To the elements it came from
Everything will return.
Our bodies to earth.
Our blood to water,
Heat to fire,
Breath to air."

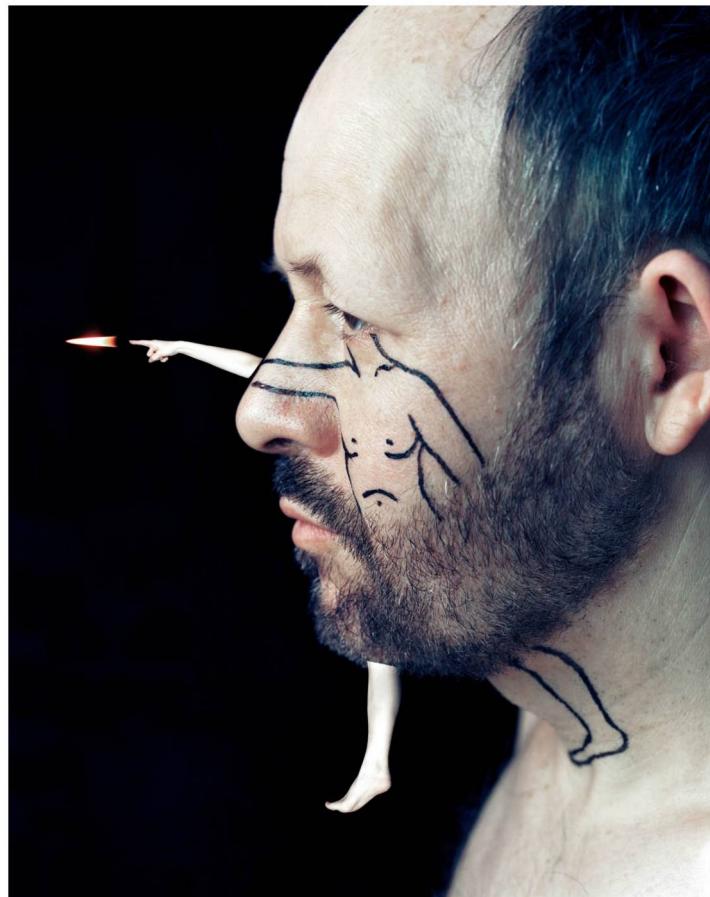
V.G., *A Spermatozoon*, 1974, 3.4 x 12.7 x 1 cm;
right: *Lightning*, 1975, 60 x 29 x 1 cm, erector set,
stands 114 cm high, steel, enamel



In man, there lives a spark of the purer fire, the inner spark that mysteriously shapes his destiny. In the world of the four elements, it is compelled to be rather passive and suppressed, if not imprisoned. At least that was how the Christian Gnosis envisioned it, suggesting the doctrine of its emancipation and restoration of its innate strength. Even if that light-spark is activated and ready to take wings, its trajectory is not too promising. Followed like an arrow of an archer through the layers of the four elements, it passes swiftly through the transitional stratum of the air and falls down into the water or earth. Should it happen otherwise, the spark would be like a missile dispatched into outer space: it will fly on until spent. How does its trajectory manifest in us mere mortals? In very exceptional cases, the flight of the great and very pure intellect leads to fast spiritual realization, but in reality, it would be just one of these mental projections drifting in uncertainty. The activation of that spark can give an almost magical power of perception, sharpening awareness to the point of throbbing pain. In creative fields, it might confer on an artist a ferocious insight, similar to x-ray vision, but in the end, it is usually just a flight of fancy that can bring mostly worries about an inflamed imagination. Thus, the question arises: is that fire spark in man imperfect or rather imperfectly understood?

Limited as we are in time and conditioned by the existential circumstances based on the birth-death concept, it is only natural to fail to understand one's own capacity. Add to this the fact that the matter is ever resistant to spiritual impulses. By the transference of the vitalizing fire from heaven to earth, the lower nature is inflamed and set at war with the divine spirit; that is why Prometheus was prosecuted for giving away the secret of fire to people. Fire is a great treasure; it has to be stolen from heaven, for which this mythological "savior" has been fired from the Olympus and chained to the rocks, that is, crucified in an Olympian manner.

In the context of the Ancient Greek initiation practices, the projection of a fire spark into the bitter waters of life followed by lancing it through the darkness of matter has to ignite the fire of revelation, activating god-like power in the soul. At this point, one gets a feeling almost of being reborn. Then this power begins to grow, gradually regulating the



Archer © 1998

changes in the consciousness. If that spark, as Goethe believed, echoing the classic canon, “is not fed, when it is not fanned, it gets covered by the ashes of indifference and daily wants, yet not till late, perhaps never, can be altogether quenched.”⁶¹ Such was precisely his cogent argument behind the purpose of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. Let us suppose the spark is fanned, what next? Catching fire from that almost dangerously animated spirit, one must diligently guard its flame. The awakened force will inevitably agitate an unprepared contender, making him anxious if not disorderly, angry and frenzied. Should he escape “drowning” in

the stirred-up fire, it will carry him away, transport, and enlighten him. The electrifying experience can take the form of a liberating fury, which is auspicious enough, but having



Twin Candles © 2005

many side effects, it feels like burning a candle at both ends.

There are two metaphors of fire: one is affirmative – fire of love – and the other is negative – fire of wrath. Maintaining an uneasy harmony, fire divides against itself, yet remains one as magma. Naturally, this thesis – antithesis of peace and war is shaky since the uniting and separating principles can be inverted as everything else. Often, people

support the right thing for the wrong reason, and vice versa, support the wrong thing for the right reason. What would be the better course: to be at war with the harmful influence



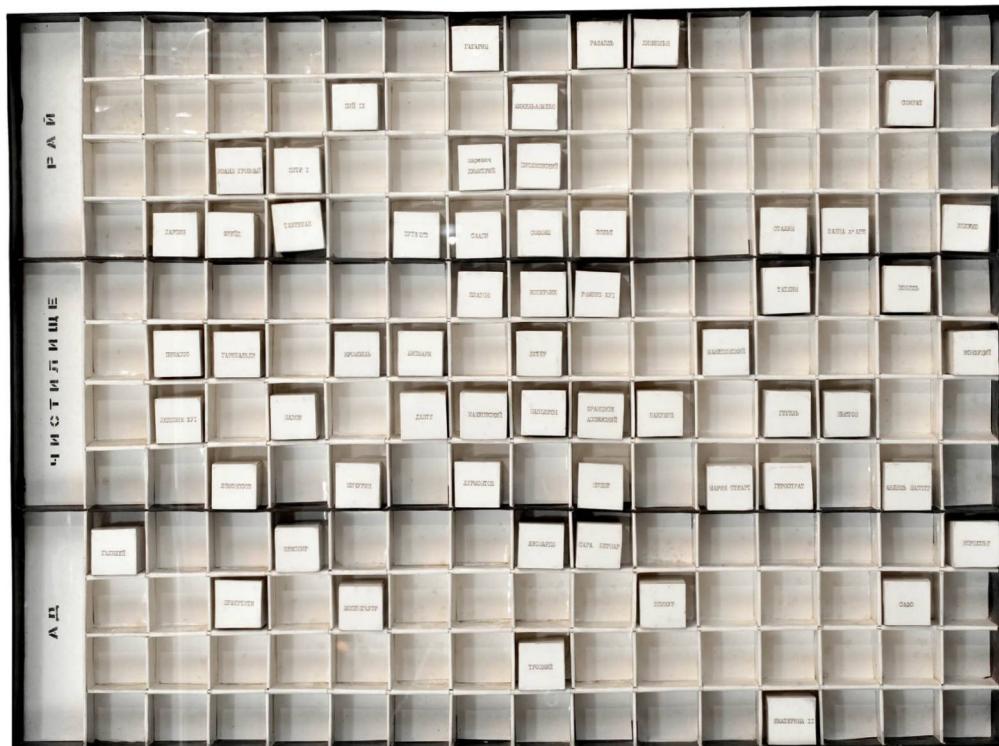
Crossed Candles © 2002

struggling for independence or to be united in love with the evil, letting it harm you irreversibly? To look at the latter situation metaphorically in the candlelight, that might be the same as holding a candle to the devil and to aid that which is wrong.

Speaking of the devil, he belongs to the matrix of the dark fire. In raising all obscuring smoke, he stirs the lower

emotions and hell-bent passions. We wonder with what hell's tenants strike their fire; and was it not, perhaps, the reason for calling the early friction matches "lucifers"? Coming down to the symbols of the infernal fire, we had better refer to the language of theology responsible for that time-honored concept. In angelology (and demonology, for that matter), the hell is ruled by the rebellious and lustrous Lucifer, who fell from heaven like lightning. When the most beautiful angel in heaven, whose name literally means "the shining one" ("lucere," "to shine" in Latin), fell down, his light became heat entering the matrix of the dark fire, which is a metaphor for the separating antagonistic intellect that burns in agony of

R.G., *Paradise, Purgatory, Hell*, 1976, wood, cardboard, paper, 56 x 42 x 3.1 cm, collection of The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. 60 cubes bearing the names of different famous personalities can be allocated by spectators to each of the three strata. The set of chosen celebrities includes such names as Socrates, Nefertiti, Galileo, Joan of Arc, Nietzsche, Napoleon, Raphael, Nobel, Confucius, Lincoln, Ramses XVI, Gagarin, the Beatles (all four in one unit), and, of course, there is Dante himself, the guide and expert in afterlife judgments.





R.G., *Paradise, Purgatory, Hell*, was recreated under our supervision in three various larger sizes, so spectators could rearrange the cubes while passing the judgments on the condition that only names are mortal. The enlarged copies were displayed for handling in Moscow in The Garage Museum, 2014, on the photograph above; The State Tretyakov Gallery, 2016, and the traveling exhibition *Poetry and Performance* in Slovakia, Switzerland, Germany, and Hungary, 2017 - 2020. Photo Z. Starodubtseva

selfishness and conflict. As a discordant element of heaven, the arch-tempter dragged along a cluster of ghosts and unholy spirits and, raising the smoke of maya, created that tempting ambiguity between good and evil that we all are familiar with.

In apocryphal and rich folk traditions, the infernal life is dreadfully picturesque in exhibiting, seen from a psychiatric point of view, various obsessive-compulsive disorders, uninhibited sex impulses, and many other indecent and dangerous habits. All residents of hell, ranging from the privileged evil spirits with the “cockscombs of phosphorescence” to small fiends and imps of various kinds, are very inventive in seeding the kernels of evil in people’s hearts and making them do weird things. In the computer era, their task became superbly easy. The hell-fire, the fire of passion and separation

is a fulcrum of angry nature supporting all devious, self-centered, furious, and filthy desires. But for those types of creatures, taken together in their collective power of evil, the hell is not too bad a place, after all. Take Goethe's Mephistopheles, who can act as a mouthpiece for their outlook: "When the Lord God threw us out of the air into the lowest depths of hell where a central fire was blazing eternally, we had plenty of illumination, but we were in a very crowded and awkward spot."⁶² The great pool of fire below can bring any imperial splendor to ashes and smoke – a hell of a lot of enjoyment for all interested in subversive pyrotechnics. In other words, the fire of evil is combustible.

The picture of the hell-fire, which may appear as a gaudy narrative intrusion into our reasoning on the four elements, is, in fact, a lawful ingredient of the theological purgatory and its labyrinthine "tax" system for salvation. For centuries, it was also a part of an art scene: many religious frescos depict it as a collective reservoir for purging sins. In the divine drama of the eternal fire that has a transforming power, the purgatory ("purifying," Lat.) burns with the fuel of wrath. With blackening light and suffocating dryness, it purifies from the passions of the lower self. According to the penal procedure codes of that unhappy place, all sheep that got lost (as they have come to be called throughout the parishes worldwide) melt their sins while bathing in vindicating fire, cleansing and vitalizing, which side effect is, indeed, judgmental. Aside from the ecclesiastical picture of suffering, an instant of mental pain and anguish is unavoidable in a moment of so-called mystic death or, in line with up-to-day terminology used in this regard, the sharp sensation of absolute gravity of a wormhole connecting to another dimension of consciousness. For the feeling of terror often comes before the sacred. Going through the fire that burns, one is gradually led to the fire that transforms and builds. "For our God is consuming fire." (Heb. xii.29)

In a gnostic sense, the imprisoned and suppressed inner fire can be restored through self-burning, or rather, burning its deposited imperfections. The transformative fire is not extinguished until these defects are done and there is nothing more to burn. At that stage, the soul encounters the highest rise of flame, the *magna flamma*, as it is described at the beginning of the Revelation, "And his feet like unto fine

brass, as if they burned in a furnace.” (1:15) Something of the sort is depicted in the image *Hot Feet*, flaming like the Twin Towers. This work was done in 1997, and in retrospect, it is a kind of premonition of 9/11 when in 2001 Lower Manhattan was filled with fire, and people committed suicide by jumping down from the blazing clouds. That major conflagration looked like a rehearsal of doomsday, leaving the place a burnt-out shell. For New Yorkers, all that seemed to have an apocalyptic proportion.

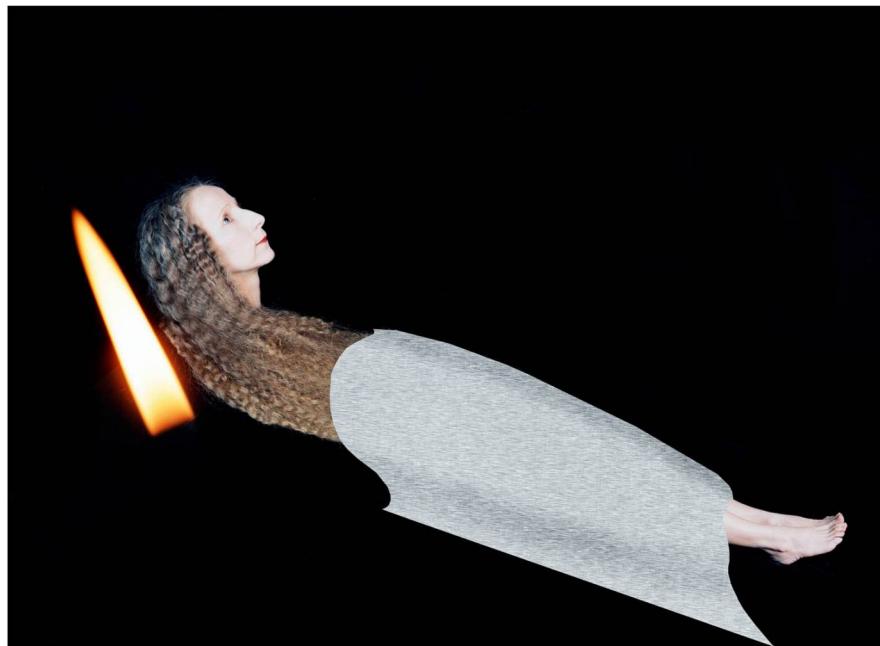
Regarding the split between the highest and the lowest expressions of the fire element, in certain situations, one has

Hot Feet © 1997



to veil part of the evil and add some serviceable good. For instance, a funeral ceremony of cremation – the burning of dead bodies until only ashes are left – is also performed by means of fire. That ritual transition of bodies to nothingness also has its weird aspects. According to some (mostly Eastern) eschatological canons, the living, not the dead, self-perform that ritual of transformation by fire, entering it of their own free will. That might be interpreted as an accelerated personal experience of the suprapersonal conflagration when the world is reabsorbed in the divine fire – something like the Big Bang in reverse that happens at the end of time and the world. That flashpoint future when everything is absorbed back into its divine source is a kind of routine awaiting the world at the end of each *manvantara*, including the current round of existence. Perhaps, it will be like the magical spectacle of the volcano of unlimited capabilities, something to be adored, but from afar. From where, then? No level of preparation can make your mind comfortable with that scenario.

Pillow and Blanket © 1997, photo, metal



Those able to bear fire and enjoy it must be prepared by its flames, which could be understood both symbolically and literally. In Bulgaria, for example, the ancient ritual of barefoot dancing on smoldering embers has been passed down through generations. During that ritual, the dancers get into a trance that enables them to reach a supernatural devotional state that makes their feet invulnerable to the fire. In a strange way, the Orthodox Christianity of that region assimilated this remnant of pagan tradition, an exotic and rather offbeat venture for the European mind. The dancers, called “nestinari,” come from the lineage of fire-worshipers endowed with special somewhat shamanic power.

Back Lights © 1997



A more complex understanding of the fire element is found in the Orient, where metaphysics, psychology, myth, and life are closely related; thus, fire as a foundation of energy is seen through many layers of interpretation. In yoga, *tapas* (literally “heat” in Sanskrit) designates ascetic practices in general, including fasting, vigil kept in the presence of fire, holding the breath while burning with “magical heat,” and so on. All these ascetic practices, which essentially are “self-heating” to an extreme through austerity, promise and in fact result, if successful, in control and power over the lower self. The “magical heat” that gives the yogi mastery over the fire opens the level of consciousness beyond the human condi-

Foot Set © 1997





Sitting Place © 1997

tion. (In Western mythology, a similar state is depicted by the superhuman strength of the mythological heroes, Greek and Norse, whose power is often ignited by rage, the quality that breaks further comparison down.) The magical heat of a yogi is closely related to the rising fire of the *kundalini* when, through tremendous stimulation of the nervous system, the spine of the individual gradually becomes the channel of the stellar connection. The purification through burning (*tapas*) produces an ecstatic state when one is dipped in the flame as though it were water. It gives a yogi an energizing capacity to generate strength, physical and mental. The latter takes its expression in the power of integrated thought that cannot be

destructured by the outer or inner stimuli; neither memories nor random thinking can dilute its attentiveness. In a dreadful and wonderful way, the rage of extreme inner heat not only makes one invulnerable to the external world but also may be taken as a sign of the appropriation of sacrality. In a religious context, that is a mystical moment when one gives up and leaves all to God. That acute state is usually resolved in the baptism of fire in an eschatological sense.

The secret fire comes from man's flaming center and generates creative and destructive impulses. In the words of Thomas Eliot, we are "redeemed from fire by fire." Poison antidotes poison, as contrary cures contrary. Following that homeopathic principle, we can arrive at the shamanic secret of the mastery over fire. Heated through asceticism, somewhat similar to Tibetan *Tummo* yoga practices, the future shamans pass through the magic stage of "sweating out" their ego's libido and become masters of the fire technique shared with the blacksmiths on the physical level and the yogis on the mystical plane.

The miracle of the transmutation of the lower into the higher by fire does not always require practicing tapas or shamanic training: take the case of the babe Demophon, whom goddess Demeter tried to make immortal by dipping him in flame. Unfortunately, his panic-stricken mother, queen Metanira, interfered with the ritual, and this gift of immortality was lost. The babe Achilles was somewhat luckier: he was bathed semi-successfully in the fiery river Styx. From mythology, we know what happens to those who were "undercooked" in the fire initiation. Achilles' heel, by which his mother, sea goddess Thetis, held him in the dead water, was the only place of his body that was not touched by the sacral burning substance; and that seemingly insignificant weakness made him fatally vulnerable. It is not enough to be a hero; the radical recasting of consciousness calls for extinguishing all remnants of the self-centered light of a Luciferian kind, however minor and unintentional they may be.

The burning process can be expressed in many ways; it makes no difference as far as the ideas stay intact, so we thought while creating our visual concepts of the fire element. Not only the images but also the narrative on fire, the hermeneutics of it, seems to serve us as our *sursum corda* ("hearts up!" Latin) medium. Examining our different at-



Like Cures Like © 2002

tempts of rising up out of the limitations of all that might be symbolized by the black fire, we turned them into allegories in which we personally participated. The artists appear, as it were, to live within their images when they are at work. We admit that our behind-the-scenes feelings and “fiery” process of thinking are inclined to venerating the paradox, closely connected to what is called “power of imagery.” This power, should it prove to be genuine, is received with a touch of prophetic instinct. Art is like a mirror that “sees” more than what is just right in front of it: everything can multiply in quantity and the distortion in its reflections recede into infinity. In all

our “flaming” images, and there are many, the main catalytic stimulus remains basically the same, reminding us in many voices that the metamorphic process is rooted in the fire element. The worthiest we can get is to liberate our psychic energy through the sacrifice of our lower impulses: “I” must be extracted from “ego” and lifted up, integrating with the self.

Expressed in symbols, the destructive and consuming infernal fire is opposed to the intelligible holy fire. Both transcendental in their nature, they differ drastically: one burns with hate, the other with love. In most general terms, as the cause of all life and all death, fire spreads everywhere. In Buddhist tradition, the secret fire is attributed to the principle of life per se: it’s like the spirit itself while an individual life is similar to candlelight which flame can be distributed to other candles. Ruminating on the reincarnation belief, Buddhists leave that question open, wondering whether the life-giving flame of these candles remains the same or becomes different in each individual case. Who can speak about such things with certainty? Is each flame as different as the candles are different when the burned down candle passes the fire to another candle? Is it the same flame of life or another? In the succession when one candle is lit from another, the source of that flame remains undiminished. And most importantly, the blowing out of a flame cancels the necessity of the physical existence, for nirvana literally means “blowing out of a flame” and “to be extinguished.”

Let us look at the occult nature of fire, as an instrumental force of regeneration, from the alchemical point of view. The experience of the descent into the low fragmented level (symbolic incineration) and reaching a turning point that converts an emotional slump into aspiration have to be repeated several times. In that context, the interpretation of the cross marks one of the points of the alchemists’ radical departure from the Christian theology, for they read the acronym INRI for *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews), inscribed on the crucifixion cross, as *Igne Natura Renovatur Integra* (The Whole of Nature is Renewed by Fire). They regarded fire not as a destructive element but as a transforming one and maintained the theory that *permanentia* (“permanence,” literally “remaining to the end,” Lat.), or rather immortality, is reached

through the alchemical reaction of fire on fire, as fire of love vs. fire of wrath. To illustrate this idea, they often turned to the legend of the Phoenix, who is reborn over and over in fire, thus symbolizing in their understanding *anima inflammata* itself. They maintained that not only the divine spark but also the kernel of evil is in people's hearts. Once the negative tendencies and various ignorant, self-important ideals, and other discordant elements have been burnt and reduced to ashes in man's soul, his personal mind is recast into the archetypal

Mary's Stove © 2005, the Christogram "IX" (in Greek and Russian) is inscribed within the two vessels; the pomegranate seeds are inlaid as a monogram for Mary 



mind. At “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” expect a new phoenix. In spite of the weirdly antiquated slang, the collective *opus alchemicum* presents the methodical picture of transformation from the corruptible to the incorruptible state by washing by fire and burning by water. So the phoenix of the self could rise from the ego brought down to ashes.

Precisely in that context, must be seen the extraordinary experience of Blaise Pascal. After his death, his servant

Lantern © 1997





Evaporating Time © 2002

found the note sewn into his coat, the memo he never separated with. Beginning with the word “fire!” the brief note was written in his most exalted state – in the fire of revelation. That is one of those moments of great clarity when consciousness blazes up like lightning, and life is intensified to the highest degree. Struck by such lightning, the incorruptible essence in man feels immortal. In this burning, it is freed from space and time, and one feels anywhere, any time, as in a dream where the verbs have no tense, and nowhere places are everywhere. Hence, the mysteries insist, “Bathing should essentially be in fire,” for which the old Rosicrucian manuscript gives the following recipe:

“Put fire to fire.
Boil fire in fire.
Bear children in fire...
So will they live and die in fire,
And be fire and stay in fire.
Whoever seeks it, suffer.
Whoever finds it, be silent.
Whoever holds it, hide it,
Whoever may use it, do so unbeknown.
Whoever is a true Philosopher, remain nameless.
Truth no one but God.”⁶³

Fire Flask © 1996,
photos, metal



Let us look at the psychological aspects of what is going on in the alchemical furnace. As one metaphor reinterprets the other, this transforming hot enclosure might be envisioned as some solitary place “blazing” with lights in the wintry dark. What it means is that at a certain point of the hermetic experimentation, the alchemist becomes a solitary prisoner of his mind. He is removed from life and cannot be reached over a period of time, which is likely to add fuel to the furnace flame, symbolically representing the state of mental separation. Then from somewhere, some reservoir of strength within him is tapped, so he is kindled, heated, and

Water Flask © 1996,
photos, metal



fired up until his psyche rises into zeal or, in the worst-case scenario, into blazing anger. Most men's nature is unripe for the ordeal of alchemical fire, which is not so much a fact-faced field, terrible as it were, but rather a powerful psychological factor. The difference between the harsh reality and the alchemical burning is somewhat similar to the difference between the object and its concept, the phenomenon and the noumenon.

In Jungian psychology, that process is associated with "the alchemical free imagination." Creating a mystical semblance of reality, this type of imagination produces works of art, not art as we know it, based on skill and technique, but something that might be called *ars moriendi*, the art of dying with life. Consciously entering the fire for a transformation that weakens all natural forces, one is "roasted" in the fire of inspiration, faith, and intuition. The process is not much different from the Phoenix story: once burned to ashes in his low ego in self-sacrifice, the alchemist is restored to the renewed higher state. In the hermetic furnace, his negative spirit is gradually exorcized in black flames. The inflammation in spirit correlates to the burning water that can be seen as a metaphysical parallel to the liquid known in physical use as distilled spirits or simply alcohol, speaking of which we might add that vodka is a diminutive of "voda," "water" in Russian, while in Ukrainian it is called "*horilka*," meaning "burning water." And indeed, that painkilling scalding hot liquid, highly flammable and incendiary, both literally and figuratively, characteristically demonstrates the union of opposites – the water and the fire together. In daily life, we find it also in gasoline, contributing to that correlation in a dangerously combustible way.

The same reaction can be traced at the psychological level. Even if it is clear as day that the painful quality of the dark fire of wrath has to be overcome by love, we cannot resist responding to it with the Shakespearean phrase: "My only love sprung from my only hate!" uttered by Juliet about Romeo (1:5). Aside from mythological connotation, anger is a very real part of life, and it is particularly malignant in overstressing the nervous system by pouring certain "poisons" in human blood. Anger, fear, and vengeance are like a fire: the more they consume, the hungrier they get. And should one allow anger to become habitual, the health will suffer, not to



Flaming Water © 2002

mention the stress of those subjected to it. The intellectual anger of a Luciferian kind is more of some astral influence than of the physical one; in the description of clairvoyants, it appears in the human aura as flaming tongues, streaks of crimson, or stormy red clouds; all depends on its intensity and the area of expression. Fire as an overwhelming nervous force creates friction in its motion, provoking striving and anger. The old Hindu text *Shrimad Bhagavatam* analyses that type of stress in a whimsically holistic way: “With whom should thou be angry if in thine own body one limb strikes another limb? Surely, the flame of fire is not affected by

heat, no ice by cold. So with whom should one be angry?" (11:23:50)

If the fire of love can give light and wisdom, the fire of wrath heats and plunges into darkness: one is saving the world, the other is destroying it. In alchemy, the mystery of uniting and separating is developed through the continuous interaction of the elements sulfur, mercury, and salt. They also represent aspects of human personalities somewhat similar to the Greek elements. The interplay of sulfur as fiery willpower and mercury as a flood of imagination, reflect the relationship and the characters of the alchemist and his *soror mystica*. When the process of the radical recasting of con-

Heating © 2001



sciousness begins, they just have to let happen what is going to happen, however uncertain it may sound. In the alchemical series *Barchusen*, the entire process is depicted in one vessel containing the androgynous mercurial serpent that gradually devours itself in the sulfuric fire.

The beginning and the result of the opus alchemicum, in which one is transmuted into a different quality being, might be compared to the iron and gold, the so-called “impure metal” and the pure, noble gold. Passing through several stages of transformation, the alloy, comprising iron of Mars, copper of Venus, tin of Jupiter, and lead of Saturn, turns into silver of Moon at the whitening stage of *albedo* and, after

Egg betwixt © 2002





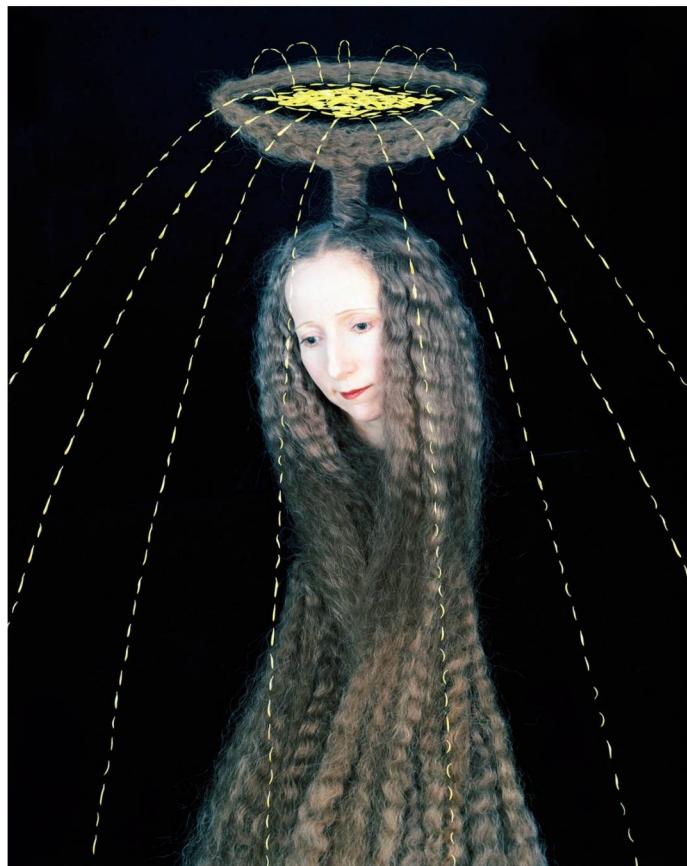
Balancing the Yolk © 2000

undergoing qualitative changes in the yellowing period of mental *citrinitas*, gradually becomes the Sun gold in the fiery *rubedo*, the final stage of transformation. In other words, the alchemist penetrates the fire, withstands its testing years, and opens the DNA configuration of the *kundalini* by awakening its serpent fire. In the progressive attainment of the evolutionary axis, he gradually extinguishes his libido, letting it go as if it was a bad dream. If the outcome is successful and the alchemist lets himself be “born upwards,” he can say that his baptism of fire has been a blessing in disguise.

The sun gold denotes the radiant light-giving zone of spirit, as opposed to the black metals symbolizing mundane

existence subsisting on burning heat of unendurable matter. (It is interesting to note in passing that the astrological glyph for the sun and alchemical symbol for gold are the same – a point in the circle, which is the Ancient Egyptian symbol for the sun god Ra.) Once the flame begins manifesting as the light and splendor, “the dark night of the soul” passes from the “freezing heat” to the “warming light” that in an instant can become as bright as day. The essence of light is the invisible fire. Therefore, the motto of alchemists was *Per ignem ad lucem* (Through the fire into the light). In classical antiquity, those who had passed the fire initiation were depicted with gilded faces and glowing nimbus, while the Ancient

Liquid Light © 2000



Egyptians put the sun disc above their heads. The Buddha was often depicted in the aureole of light or in the flame coiling around him, while in Islam, in which to picture Muhammad is considered blasphemous, the prophet was envisioned as a column of flame. In Christian tradition, the saints are painted with a golden halo signifying that they have passed from the ordinary world to the holy one and became the medium of its transmission.

The fire of love always stands against the fire of wrath, which perpetually produces fear and anxiety, ever ready but unable to swallow up the light into its darkness. For mystics, the fire of love is more nourishing than food; it casts away all

Sun Disc © 1998



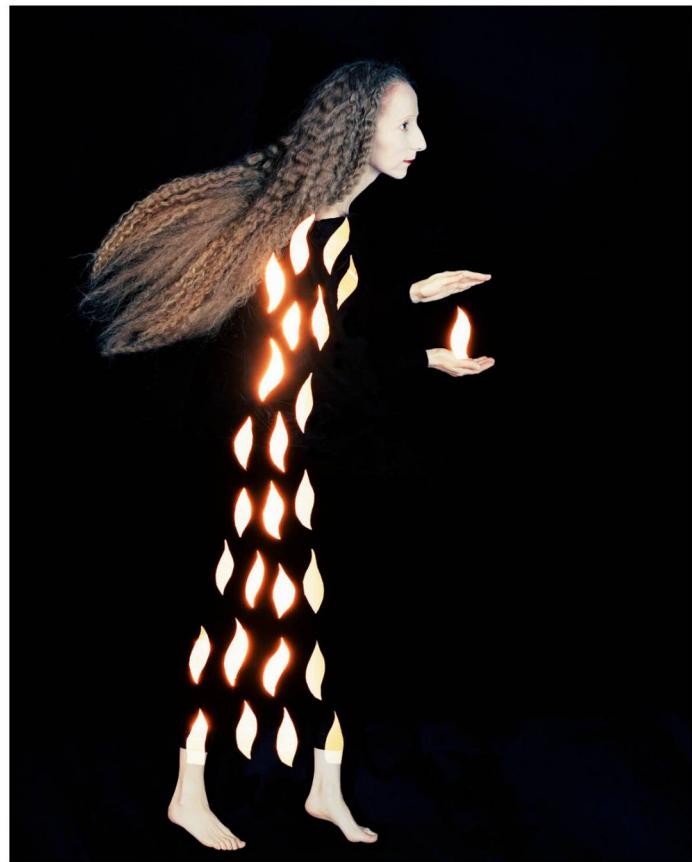


Trident © 2001

fears and increases one's clarity, especially when love is expressed in its highest form. Without it, one is powerless and unable to stand against the wrath. Not only with the feeling of love but also with the knowledge of being loved, one can fight fire with fire. Speaking biblically through Job, "His candle shine on my head, and by His light I go through darkness."(29:3) However, in this case, one may be encountered by certain difficulties because by saying that God is love, one can qually say that love is God and easily slip to worshipping one's own feelings of love and emotions, thus converting the spiritual notion of love into a mere literary device or worse still, as a justification of one's sexual appetite.

The inward fire burns in the limbs. Offering oneself as a living torch of devotion was known in many spiritual practices, including both Western and Eastern religions. In Christian iconography, St. Laurence is depicted wearing a burning tunic that signifies his fervor and his “grilling” experience, while in Buddhism, various bodhisattvas are pictured offering their fingers to the Buddha in symbolic self-immolation. This subject matter may seem a little strange in the context of the photographic images that appeared to be an organic continuation of our mental disposition at that time. There were moments when we almost felt the stirring invasion of the early medieval mind that was wrestling with itself in our

Fiery Robe © 1998



mindsets trying to express something unusually obscure and supremely refined. Comparing body images to musical instruments that when not in use seem to “encase” unrevealed harmonies, we tried to release their airs by the touch of the fingers (or, in the prosaic lexicon of photographers, by pushing the cable release plunger). As the ideas took on forms, the images also “accustomed” themselves to live amid flames without being burned.

Sometimes a spontaneous visual impulse can serve better than any linguistic fertility for expressing the notion of the mystical fire of love, or rather the sensation of it. Let us take the image *Bride*, which slender, willowy figure seems to be

Bride © 1997



only partly real as if being appended to the spirit, keeping with the spirit's form, not vice versa. To emphasize her half-substantial existence, we put the flaming wreath on the bride's head and placed a tongue of fire into her hand. Her veil – a projection of the fiery current – is literally drawn with flame. The procedure was quite straightforward: we outlined the veil in the air with the candle, photographing it at a slow shutter speed. This linear drawing is meant to imply the current of spiritual charge flowing through the burning veil that, having no material to it, is fully transparent, yet serves its purpose of obscuring, concealing, and simultaneously protecting the bride. Rendering it even more ambiguously – for mystical ideas depend as they are to a certain extent upon the imagination *half veiled* – the bride conceals behind her veil something else, something not of this world. Flying easily yet fitting, the veil outlines a large profile in repose; it faces the bride as if a phantom of her invisible "groom," whose burning eye she holds with her bare hand. Projected in such a "fiery" manner, the weightlessness of the outlined profile signifies the type of mystical presence that requires no further elucidation.

There are several other images in that series in which the current of fire lips like a raw nerve: its sharp ray pierces the black static space. In all situations, its witness' gaze is frozen in a somewhat hypnotic state, focused as a single beam. For if the whole mind is focused entirely and unconditionally while physical senses are asleep, its illuminating power increases. This power sits upon the fire. In most cases, the fire in its creative aspect, exhibiting an invigorating brightness, springs from the ashes of burned down stresses. It makes good sense not only for creative types; everyone can recollect seeing people (oneself including) gazing unwaveringly at fire, absorbed in thought, dispelling irritation or melancholy, or for no particular reason. Tasting the virtue of fire, each keeps its illusion (or mystical reality) for oneself.

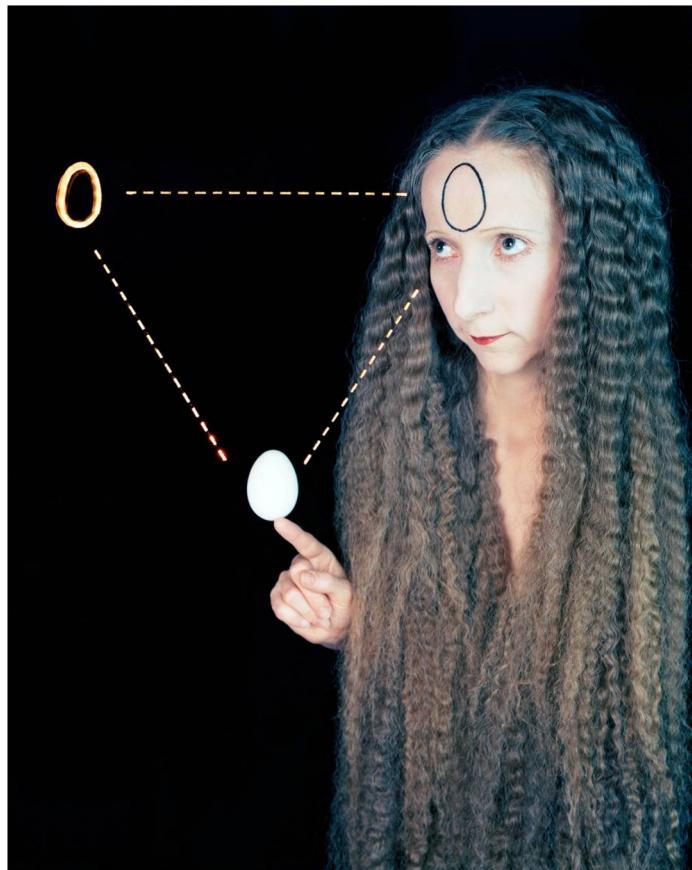
When the mind needs more space for its doubts or conquests, it resolves to pierce and break through the circumstances that in the image *Ring of Time* are depicted graphically as a circumference. The fiery current merges into a circle, outlining a clock face with a human hand pointing time. Locked within the fiery circle, time and eternity might be mistaken for each other. According to the alchemical lore,

and not only, entering a flaming magic circle gives not only miraculous protection from many things but also some power over time and space. Saying that, we do not mean to be entangled into the vagaries of alchemical enthusiasts, practical magicians, or impractical idealists – their *belle époque* is a long time passing – but employ their wonderful metaphors by weaving them together in ways that are congruent with our visual hermeneutics.

Regarding the series of images with the fiery currents, speaking of them in technical terms, we employed candles and flashlights, literally drawing with them on the empty blackness of the background, much the same as we draw with pencils on white paper. (That somehow brings to mind the half-forgotten saying that the holy law was written in white fire upon black fire.) Moving the light source while shooting with a slow shutter speed allows one to capture on film the whole pattern of the movement as a linear drawing. The

Ring of Time © 1997





Conception of an Egg © 1997

image *Conception of an Egg* would give a neat example of that process. Aside from the technical subtleties of its creation, the concept in itself is an attempt to envision the fecundating principle of the fairy current. As a process, it can be traced in the following order: first, the creative impulse germinates in the spark, generating an egg-shaped matrix in the supra-conscious zone. This egg template is drawn by fire over the empty blackness; it exists or rather preexists somewhere in deep space. Once the idea is conceived by the mind, it begins to imagine this idea; hence, the drawing of the egg appears on the forehead. Finally, the archetypal matrix materializes in the real egg, the symbol of the perpetuation of life

in matter, expressed in the age-old paradox of which comes first, the egg or the chicken? The fiery dotted lines unite the tri-partied process in a cyclic downward triangle. It might be added here in the context of the fire element that the brooding of eggs is also based on heat.

It is interesting to note that the word “brooding” has two contradictory meanings: one is an organically productive state, i.e., the gentle warming of eggs, while the other is a psychologically destructive condition of an impatient preoccupation with disturbing thoughts. What if we look at them in unison, leaving the gentle aspect to remedy the troublesome? The image *Slow Heating* gives a conceptual correlative of the

Slow Heating © 2002



magical process when gentle intuition controls feelings and mind. The word for it might be meditation. Time seems to become slower and more absorbing when gazing unwaveringly at one point in a hypnotic trance, a prospective initiate tries to maintain the equilibrium of thoughts and things. For the transformation in fire is a mental operation: the refined mind has to be balanced, clear, and steady. Depicting that state with a somewhat impersonal generalized expression of the face, we tried to emphasize the mental equilibrium by the gracefully rounded forehead, steady gaze, and the peaceful eyes that are not traveling but arriving, if we may say so. (For this reason or just by quantum chance, *Slow Heating* was reproduced on the cover of *Zoom* photography magazine that published an interview with us and a portfolio of our images in the same issue.⁶⁴⁾

Some people are able to keep the warmth of the meditative fire alive and healing, while others burn bright and blow up. Gentle yet attentive cultivation of balance serves as the fuel for the brain maintaining the meditative fire. Having wholesome roots, that kind of slow heating will result not in a temperamental conflagration, but in the spiritual radiance that illuminates, should conditions permit it. Following that old-time precept, we subjected our next series of works to a gentle fire, depicting it not literally, but metaphorically, with the red and yellow glow of the mosaics made from petals of flowers and seeds of pomegranates. The rectified energy of a gentle fire can produce light in its enchanting lightness, poetically speaking, with a taste of virtue and openness, the qualities in which one is in great need of after bathing in a living fire and dipping in the very spirit of the flame.

7: BURNING ROSESBUSH

The fire with the blazing tension of its expression gradually subsided in our works. Replacing the real fire with its conceptual depiction, we remained under the influence of the supernormal energy of this element. First came the red roses, which scarlet and crimson petals glowed like stained glass in many mosaic images. Rising from the actual flame, the fire in its conceptual expression was appeased by roses but with the emphasis on their off-putting quality, their thorns, and prickles. It was almost as if we were being led about by some invisible hand through the many levels of the fire element's manifestations. Gradually, we developed our discourse in the manner of the sutra. In the process of its own becoming, it was carried out like a thread that binds together beads in a

Rose Bed © 2000



rosary (that's precisely the meaning of *sutra* in Sanskrit). In our case, the creative flux was akin to one long performance consisting of staccato images or rosary beads united by a single string. Viewed through a semantic perspective, "rosary" comes from the figurative meaning of "rose garden," *rosarium* in Latin. It all seems to be linked together, or else we imagined it.

Nonverbal mythological allegories conceal an intriguing range of symbols. Refocusing our attention, we began to reduce words to their hidden meaning, to the silence of a still performance, to which the visual language of roses was particularly suited. We used them for making crowns and staffs and converted their thorny stems into human figures, cages, and fences. We arranged their petals into mosaic images of burning bushes, philosophers' gardens, and other allegorical scenes that featured a bonfire, a shroud, and a maverick scarlet horse. That blazing world with its pervasive sense of the unreality of mythological truth was all in our mind.

The concept of the burning bush made a transitional link between the images with actual fire and its allegoric expression. How much is given to us to know about the bush that was burned but never consumed and remained undamaged? The metaphysical concept of the eternal fire that seems wholly outside of time is different from our material fire that we feel at the acutest. The everlasting fire gives everlasting life, if that's what it is, a vexing mystery for us mortals. That fire does not go out as does the physical one. Therefore, since the nursery era of our civilization, it was commonly accepted to substitute the fire-visage metaphor for forbidden realistic images of the divine presence, and the Biblical version of it (*Exodus 3:2-4*) does not deviate from that tradition. In the crucial moment, God appeared to Moses as fire in the bush, out of which the heavenly voice spoke to him – the holy fire kindles a sacred language.

To shed some light on the under-meaning of the burning bush allegory, we would suggest looking at it as a balancing midpoint in the canonical controversy between Jacob's assurance, "I have seen the Lord, face to face," (*Gen. 32:31*) and St. John's assertion, "No man has seen God" (*John 1:18*). Of course, one can easily resolve this dilemma with St. Augustine's aphorism, "If you have comprehended God, what you have comprehended is not God."⁴⁵ When thinking



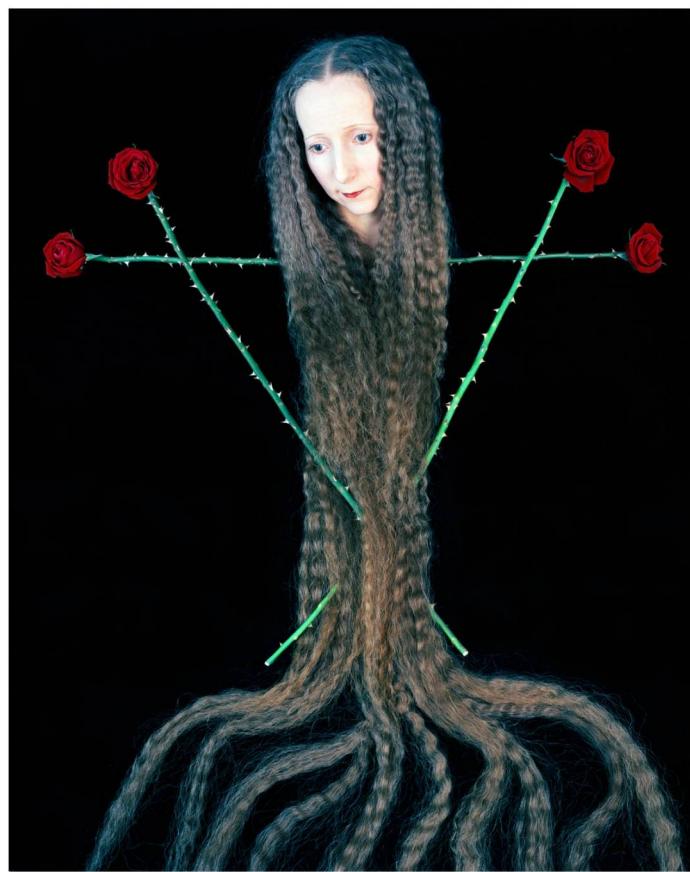
Burning Rosebush © 2000

in that dimension, transcendent as it is, any sensible creature would want to know more about it, about that which exceeds all words. And here we have a problem. Man can paint himself pictures of an ideal paradisiacal life such as we have never lived while feeling perfectly at home with the low moral standards of the world, which present state might be characterized not so much by the familiar expression “paradise lost,” as by the paradise thrown away. In certain liminal situations, every atheist can become a half-believer, translating what is meant under the burning bush into his own terms. It needs a great deal of cooperation between heaven

and man, but even if the former could offer that cooperation, the latter would be unable to accept it. And yet, it was said that the word of God expresses itself to those worthy to hear it. Perhaps, these communications are always present in the air at some frequency foreign to our ears or takes inexplicable forms not less bewildering than the burning bush. As a living fire, it serves as a medium of transmission of knowledge, which can never be explained in full, telling us no more than the extent of the untold is infinite.

The spiritual exegesis of the holy fire is a story within a story, which can be followed in the art with equal visual fertility. Let us compare two metaphors for what no one has ever

Rose Tree © 2000





The Burning Bush © 1997

seen. In the image *The Burning Bush*, the five tongues of the actual fire rise from the pillar of aspiration, while in *Invisible Bonfire* (p. 380), the “whisper of Divinity” seems to be communicated telepathically through the rejuvenating rosebush burning with the red blood petals. The realistic tongues of flame looking stern and austere cannot promise a smooth experience – the revelation might pass through one’s mind like a hot ray. When the fire is lit within, it burns all thoughts away. The slim unsubstantial figure – a maiden’s tower as a lighthouse in the dark – stands submissively hypnotized, with the intense look of someone singled out by chance, or perhaps by fate. Trying and tempering fire can reach a higher

degree, evoking an inevitable feeling of fear so each bush might look like burning. The sense of terror often comes before the sacred, before what was called *misterium tremendum*. A certain amount of silence might be useful at this point.

Submitted to the contemplative “flame,” as in *Invisible Bonfire*, one is affected by it quietly as if under a spell. Spinning your own thoughts and feelings under the magnetic lure of the flame can turn them into a mystery even to yourself. Denoting the gracious glow of the incorruptible light, the gentle fire “lights up” knowledge with mercy and

Invisible Bonfire © 2001



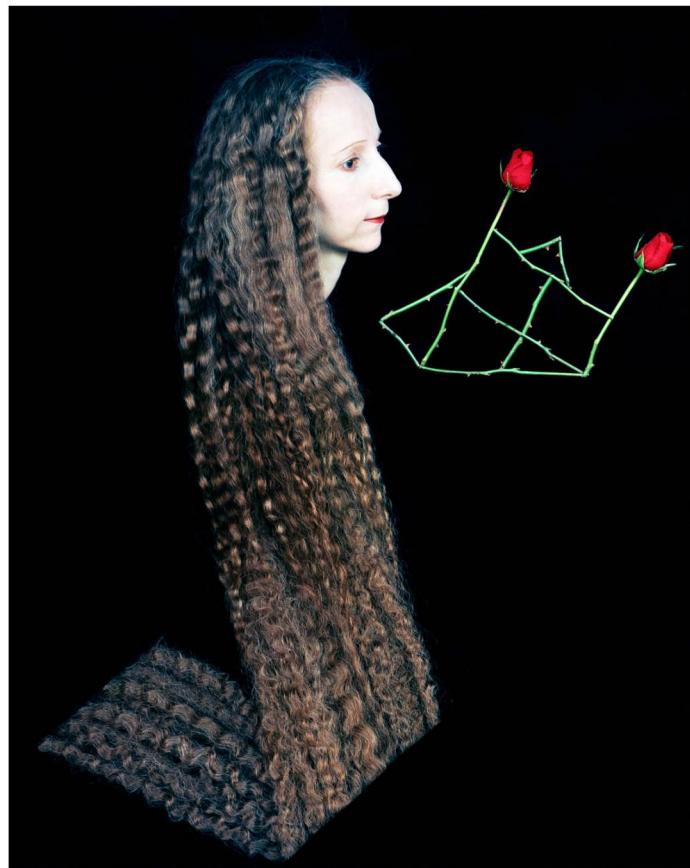
peace. However, the fire of blazing red petals of this image contains another fire: its black negative space outlines a hole leading to the black background, as if to the pyre. Taking this black hole for an extension of the death metaphor, we might add that all individual lives converge in the infinity of its blackness that contains a multitude of invisible shades that elude us like colors evade someone who is color blind. Even ordinary color film might add some interesting details in this regard, *Invisible Bonfire* including. On the negative of this photograph – in which the color codes are in reverse – the red bonfire is complimentary green while the black areas are transparent, somewhat similar to the light that is invisible and transparent – “transparent to transcendent,” to borrow one of Joseph Campbell’s favorite phrases. In hermetic lore, the light works as an invisible transformative force, illuminating, guiding, and governing. It is in this spirit that the metaphor of burning can also obtain an additional meaning if not an altogether different one. The actual suffering induced by some dangerous situation (the ordeal of the tempering fire and hollow emptiness) can be seen in a different light, illuminating, guiding, and governing.

Introducing the same concept of fiery insight from a different perspective and various degrees of intensity, from the actual to metaphoric expression of flame, we had no intention to defile all physical laws but to express a moment of clarity, an acute way of being exposed to some unusual knowledge, worth the straining of every nerve in order to acquire it. There are mental states in which we can glance vistas hidden from us in everyday consciousness. That is the sort of phenomena, which might be described as a sudden insight or a telepathic connection with divinity or all other minds in their collective flux. After all, each searching man can have his own sense of adventure that succeeds for a time and then returns him to what is called a normal life.

For several years, the roses entered our scenery and bloomed luminously in the darkness of the velvety background. Roses are flowers that grow in the “prophetic garden,” they are of a rich, spontaneous material and play a principal part in many floral rituals. Attracting with their great lush blossoms, they played many roles in our theater of plants, bursting into blooming flames, flowing like a bloody river, and turning into sacrificial offerings, geometric propo-

sitions, and everything else, you may say, from beds to horses. Cut one rose, and two will grow in its place, gardeners say, praising their full-bodied bloom, long stems, and sharp thorns as hard as steel. The rose is a rejuvenating plant, but it has thorns – medicinal fire in the blood, sounds about right, even if there is no such thing. It has been said that plants also have feelings. Perhaps they are deeply aware of the fleeting fragility of life, especially when they are carelessly picked, sniffed, and discarded. But we have never been plants; we can only guess at what they might feel or think in their flowery way. Quick to burst open and spread its fragrance, “the rose is without why: she blooms because she

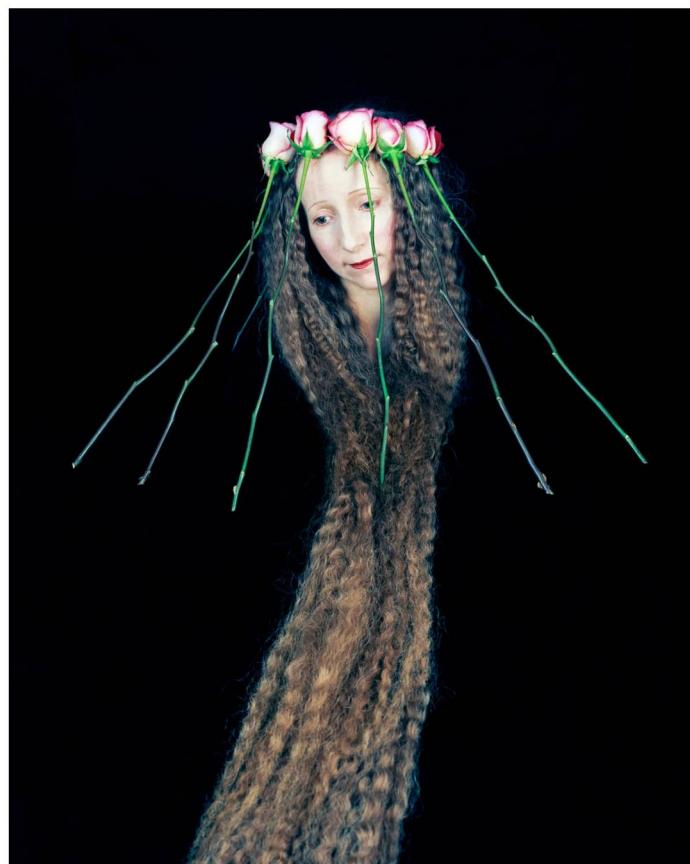
Message © 1998



blooms" wrote the German mystic and poet Angelus Silesius ("Die Rose ist ohne warum: sie bluhet, weil sie bluhet"). Winged with its twiglets and spikes, the rose seems to be a crowning achievement of Mother Nature in her horticultural pursuit. For us humans, the rose was always a living symbol. As such, it is particularly ambiguous as a crown of thorns, which glory is so metaphorical in some ways, and so matter-of-fact in others. In simple reasoning, all roses are with thorns, but not all thorns are roses.

Thinking in that dimension, we made crowns from roses by turning them upside down or weaving the *Bridal Veil* by suspending their stems in the air. The slender, dressed in hair

Bridal Veil © 2000





Crown © 1998

figure in *Crown* looks like a damsels in a towering hat from the time of the troubadours; she is frozen in a quick forward movement, caught in a sudden concentrated effort. The roses' corollas form the wreath on her head while the upward ray of green stems give her crown its natural sharp ends. They are supposed to imitate the rays of the ruling Sun – that was the original meaning of the ornate headdress worn by many sovereigns. The rose crowns were seen on many heads: on the Roman emperors, they signified their full blood power, on the heads of poets and lovers, roses bloomed with imagination and desire. Poetic personalities always thought of them-

selves as sensitive plants in a rock garden of prosaic reality, while for young lovers in their exaltation, the entire world seems to turn into a rose garden. In their twenties, the fire lights in their blood devouring all other feelings, but in a few years, it burns itself out, and as it is frequently the case, they find themselves tied to the wrong person whom they do not love anymore; then their lives seem to be strangely warped if not altogether damaged by their rosy illusions. To them, Robert Herrick left his famous advice:

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.”⁶⁶

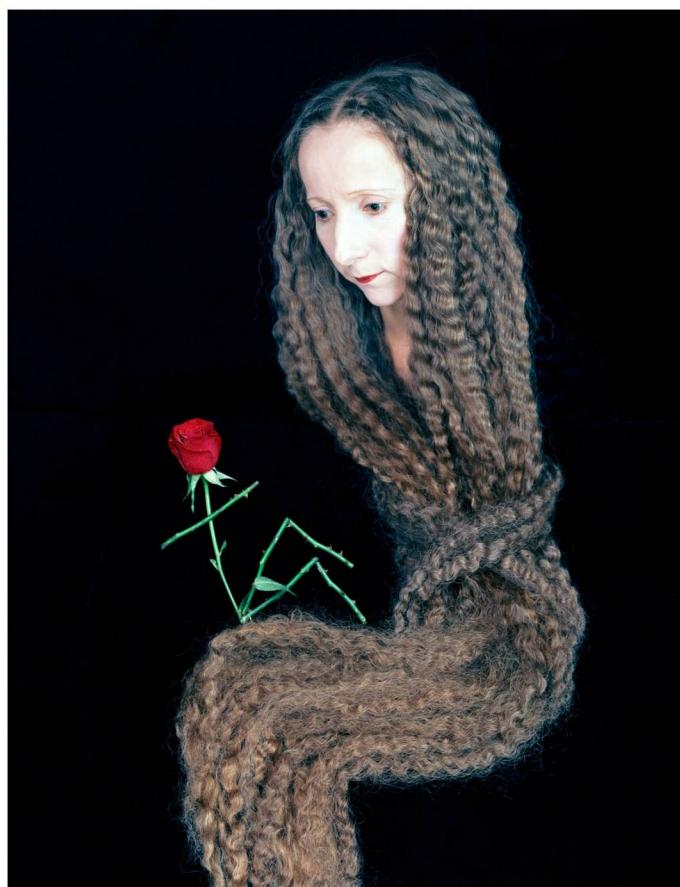
These erotically charged flowers could be dangerously aphrodisiac and ominously funerary. When too strong feelings are implanted in man unable to wrestle with his anxiety, they might be sharp as a razor and hurting as thorns. People are led by their desires and unconsidered impulses, grand or otherwise, and reap the fruits or bear the losses. The incomplete theorem of everyday living explains why people's destinies are defined by their actions, often preconceived through rose-colored glasses. Roses again, just when one needs a good dose of reality. These and other connotations might be applied to the images with roses, beautiful and transitory, alluring and warning, and yet miraculously unspoiled in the aesthetic imagination.

We should not overlook the fact that roses are so very tightly and intricately networked with mythology. The god Dionysus was decked with roses, which sanguineous and, at the same time, gory redness symbolized the patterns of his painful deification. Like a man playing his idea of God (Dionysus is a patron of performing arts, among other things), he passed through several transitional states of being that were reflected in his different world perception and conscious assimilation of his complex experience. It began from the indulgence in sensuality with naive acceptance of its harmful influences and – as people are responsible for their demons – culminated in the sacrificial dismemberment and its aftermath, indescribably weird. Skipping the brutal, action-packed side of the myth, we will just say that at the

end he was revived in full blood and became the youngest addition to the ruling *Dodekatheon* or the twelve immortal Olympians. Note that he is the only one of them to have a mortal mother. His myth makes a blueprint (we may say *red-rose-print*) for the solemn mystery, in which one is gradually refined to a state of manifested spirit, or, put in the Eastern context, finds freedom from the bondage of the flesh and the cycle of *samsara*. The similar thorny wreath was put on the head of the Messiah.

Estimating various mythological aspects, we would think that humanity lives in a vortex of mystery. Moving that vortex on the material plane, we cannot ignore the fact that

Rose Child © 1998



periodically the makeup of our world becomes a pretty grim show, but that is the only world we have got in this dimension. Not many of us notice how the sacral aspect of life is being torn out of the world and withering like a rose that has completed its bloom. If an individual of a vigilant kind manages to get rid of the cursed apathy and begins fighting a losing battle against the constraints of human nature, he tends to be anti- almost everything, including himself. In the world where money is power's master key, it is easy to invite crucifixion by crusading against injustice. For most people, that is only a metaphor. To spell it in the language of flowers, the thorns of the rose are painful just for those who touch them.

Rose Stems © 2003



From a psychological perspective, this all might look different. Hypersensitivity can make torture out of many situations, but if the painful aspect is assimilated in an ascending way, it could restore calm or in acute conditions lead to heroic or fanatic acts of sacrifice. Red roses are flexible enough art material for depicting the allegories of that nature. The loveliness of the flower which colors are eloquent and bloody dazzling awakes some instinctive reaction to the images, which tormenting aspects are bordering on beautiful abstractions. Whoever loves beauty is unable for that very reason to love ugliness; even if that may sound as a chiseled phrase offered as an opinion from antiquity, there is a certain truth to it. In mystical connotation, the thorny “power” of the crimson-scarlet-ruby roses manifests like stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon anyone who comes too near. The symbolism of flaming red roses is of somewhat consecrating quality, including both *l'amour et la mort*.

Classical tradition informs us that the red rose sprang from the blood of Adonis, whom in his “postmortem” state Zeus allowed to divide his love between Aphrodite and her underworld equivalent Persephone, the white and red roses of the Greek pantheon. In *Red Shower*, the ruby petals, blossomy and liquid, seem to fly like butterflies and fall like drops of blood. For the medieval mystics, bleeding and washing with blood, taken together as one symptomatic sign, signified the union of suffering and compassion, or rather earthly passion and the tendency towards heavenly perfection. The emotional exaltation induced by the simultaneous pressure of the two extremes from the below and the above can culminate in a complete change of heart. Protected by a safe sense of unreality, the mystics associated that perceptual transformation with the opening rose, which exquisite fragrance and beauty can elevate the spirit. There is little outward survival of such fragility, yet the bleeding rose that bears the energy of the vital fluid was accepted as a symbol of healing via suffering and enlightenment. The experience of mystical illness was not considered a hampering factor but rather a catalyst as well as an unavoidably painful aspect of spiritual work. In the imagery of contemplative mysticism, the flaming rose belongs to the altar with the perpetual fire burning as if it would burn forever. But about that one can talk only inwardly, taking for granted that perfect purity is

imageless and formless. For mystics, it became their reality, the only one in which they cared to live in the secret springs of their souls, where there was no “isness,” as it is found in nature.



Red Shower © 2000

We could not make our artwork imageless and formless, but trying to express some elements of mystical practices created a somewhat surreal world of images that referred to the alternate state of consciousness inaccessible to the intellect. Though our roses came from nature's garden, they seem to belong to the medieval tapestries of metaphors, time-hon-

ored and non-fading. All that may sound idealistic, but our approach to them was sufficiently rational, and our methods of photography were precise and calibrated, not allowing emotions to govern our rose garden experiments.

The allegory of the cross of roses, which is a free-will offering, self-inflicted suffering, and punishment in one image, reverts our thoughts to certain historical illustrations. The first to come to mind is the Rosicrucian fraternity that has derived its name from the expression “*ad rosam per crucem, ad crucem per rosam*” (“to the rose through the cross, to the cross through the rose”). The Rose Cross Order, involved in various occult practices, produced a mysterious

Crosswise © 2000





Rosy Crosses © 2003

document *Fama Fraternitatis*, describing the apocryphal journey of a certain Father C.R. who was initiated by the secret sages of the east and, adopting the Pythagorean principles, wrote the Rosicrucian manifesto. In the traditional Christian iconography, the cross is associated with Christ and the rose with the Virgin Mary. Genuinely understanding these two symbols, one can abstract the parabolic biblical narrative in a way that expresses the essence of it. The rose and cross mystery is not a matter of pure intellectual speculation: at some point, its sacrificial aspect can become a daily possibility. Even those who do not believe in souls, yet have them, may exhibit a strange tendency towards perpetual self-efface-



Open Window © 2001

ment because of modesty and humility. As to roses, we can look at them as an emblem of perfection, pure love, a mystic center, or the philosopher garden, but before one can enter such a garden and experience its healing effect, one must pass through the thorny fence, the fire ring, or, in Rosicrucian terms, undergo the trials of the rose and cross-related mystery.

Reverting to the old pagan cults of disestablished gods, we find that their roses also had a healing effect, which seems to be an international mythological phenomenon, a result of the crystallization of collective thinking for centuries. When Apuleius turned Lucius into the beast of burden in *The Golden*

Ass, the latter was able to recover his human form only by eating roses. As a concupiscent transgressor of public order and morals, Lucius seemed to deserve his demons that performed on him that nasty trick with a definitely atavistic smell. Generally, the tricksters (in his case the two witches) practice what is forbidden by playing with the incomprehensible and dangerous. *The Golden Ass* is one of many stories about their misdeeds in the sphere of the human bestiary inhabited by thousands of men and women that have no more conscience than wild animals if not trees or stones. Driven by bestial appetites, Lucius impersonates a Roman nobleman, whose conscience resembled that of an ass'. Bearing the special mark of fate, he indeed assumes the appearance of an ass and is forced to lead the life of a beast of burden with many predictable misadventures, wearing and shameful. Gradually, he gets rid of his ass-faculties blocking his human entity and, ultimately, is admitted to the miracle of the red roses and the evil spell that has paralyzed his psyche is broken. The *homo-animus* metamorphosed into *homo-mentalis*. It is worth noting that the name of the young god of love Eros, a fecundating “spark” of the Greek pantheon, reads “rose” when its letters are rearranged. In psychoanalytic theory, eros is an amalgam of sexual desire, pleasure, and the instinct for self-procreation – precisely such a composite “eros” was reconfigured into “rose” in Lucius’ psyche.

Let us survey the traces of that “reconfiguration” process through different zones of consciousness: conceptual, psychological, religious, spiritual, practical, and certainly, creative, with the many linkages between them all. Despite its flaws in rationale, art is a map for uncovering various parts of the human psyche, a chart for a particular type of pilgrim. In its exalted form of expression, art is also a crusade, a consecration to various ideas: some serve noble purposes, some merely serve the ego, art for the sake of art or perverted fantasies, while others are just didactic politically correct statements or an inherent nonsense. But at its best, creativity serves spiritual evolution. In the Renaissance, artists tried to conceive the promised beatitude in carnal terms, employing truncated flora with its lulling meditative ambiance. Instead of depicting the blooming nature we conceptualized our messages using, tentatively speaking, a floral sign language with an esoteric substratum. The iconographic symbol of a

rose has many twists and turns – life goes in circles, full of thorny rosebuds, presenting enough surprises. We must continually go on and hold out while time is slipping through our life like fine sand through an hourglass. An extrovert might be content with life as a quality in itself, while for an introvert it can open up a long vista of troubles and events. Maybe the idea of pilgrimage through the psychic realm can make our existence more meaningful by opening portals to some other dimensions of human intelligence.

Undertaken for some spiritual reasons, a pilgrimage usually begins under the pressure of implacable necessity or, rather, when fate merely takes its course. Rising above the trials of existence, a contemplative wanderer must have enough faith to believe that he will not be let down. Depicted from this standpoint, our *Pilgrim* is also meant to stride through the not so rosy roads, through the alien silent darkness (the profound emptiness of the background), renouncing the firm ground underfoot and holding the rod of roses without hands. Calm and receptive, *Pilgrim* seems to know the road, as if by instinct; his walk (to overlook the gender identity) is light and peaceful. It is one of the good fortunes man has when his feminine “she” is in close touch with his masculine “he.” The barren simplicity of the figure bearing its insignia of roses alludes to humbleness, courage, introversion, and solitude. All details are given only to implement a spiritual principle of the pilgrimage during which the actual material world is a mere starting point of all nonmaterial pursuits. In that sense, the pilgrimage is an inward event, and not a physical one, even if it takes place in the terrestrial circumstances. Each one walks alone, each by oneself. As to the roses adorning the stuff, they are widespread terrestrial flowers, which subliminal beauty contrasts with their thorny stems – a compelling feature for presenting a controversial symbolism, resolving in uneasy harmony. In poetical interpretation, it would be love bathed in blood, while in mysticism it is symbolized by the blooming rose cross, as it is on the emblem of the Rosicrucian Order. In the past, this sign was (and perhaps still is) a metaphor for the unified consciousness.

However, before the roses bloom on the cross, one needs to go through many stages of pilgrimage. In alchemy, they were coded in the famous engravings called *Rosa Mundi*

showing a wheel or a labyrinth with the inscription *dat rosa mel apibus* (the rose gives the bees honey). The center of this *Rose of the World* symbolizes a door into the pure heart located everywhere at once. If this door is found, love conquers death and the quest, which is right at the limit of human capability, is fulfilled. Strange and lonely is the spiritual path, and the destination is uncertain even if the pilgrim and his aim seem to be certain. There are so many inconveniences involved in that search, ruled, as far as it is ruled at all, by an incomplete asceticism; the complete asceticism tends to be less nomadic. Let us “verify” the austerity por-

Pilgrim © 2000



trayed as an essential part of the ritual journey by a visual paradox. Crippled with the rigid prickly rose stems, *Pilgrim* has no real hands and would not survive without them (one cannot expect a person without arms to feed himself). However, associating such a stem-limb with an invisible hand of destiny or a thorny hand of nature, we can come up with another allusion: nature wants the utmost before it gives the utmost. Each step of the mildly sinister figure of the pilgrim is hard work; he needs his senses to be sharpened by the perils, homelessness, and holy pain, which is not without a streak of madness.

Longing for a change of the situation can make a sort of

Bare Feet © 2000





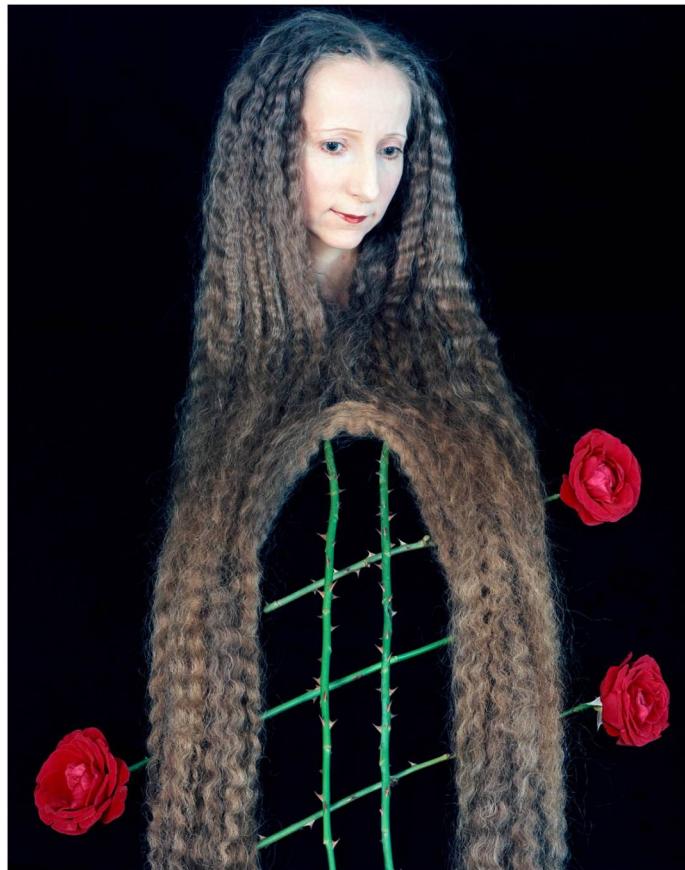
Transit © 2002

pilgrim out of anyone, especially if that longing is increased by the innate uneasy impatience that pursues a restless person wherever he goes. Such a life will also be beset with many risks of a physical, moral, mental, and even religious nature, should one reveal a devotional inclination. The questing we are referring to is poles apart from drifting in life, from that wavering restlessness to which so many people are succumbed to due to the atrophy of their willpower. On the other hand, perseverance and ruthless determination can have the opposite effect. Even when he is sincere in his spiritual quest, an ambitious man is always in danger of mixing up his unrealized desires for worldly things with his secret search for

God. The pilgrimage that we have in mind is not motivated by selfish parochial interests, it is neither traveling – the robust nature delights in the excitement of traveling – nor a rootless wandering. Often, sorrow drives one to the search, willingly or unwillingly, by an unexpected event that can plunge one's mind into a state of misery and brooding on the futility of life. For many, the question – *what are we here for?* – is ever opened, challenging us to search the answer.

Turning metaphysical concepts into art, we enter virtual reality. The search that involves a continuous practice of self-control is not in the actual land, but in the apparent realities and in favor of a spiritual opening. The type of idealist in-

Rose Portal © 2000

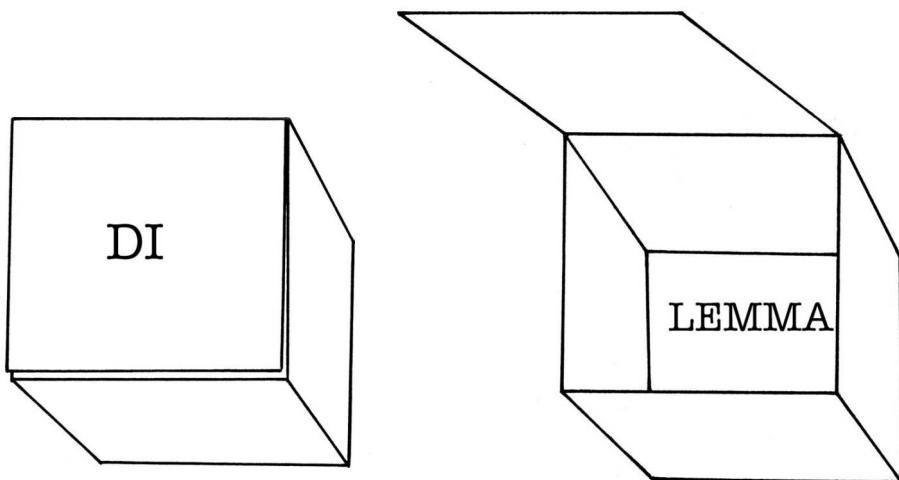




Spanish Rose Cross © 2000

clined to such a quest, willingly alone by his choice and usually involved in meditative practices, tends to live by the high principles. Often, he takes them as a launching point for that broad-ranging odyssey across given us time and space. Let us imagine his “map” in the form of the cross, made of two lines: one of vertical time and the other of horizontal matter. You can explore matter continuously, but time is not available in unlimited amounts. Spiritual evolution, which is somewhat similar to the evolution of species, can take place over periods lasting from days to thousands of years. Many great thinkers repeatedly called for the acceleration of this process, while Plotinus’s wording seems to relate to our

concept of pilgrimage in particular: "Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland... This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land... You must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birthright of all, which few turn to use."⁶⁷ What Plotinus envisaged can fit the traditional molds: "the One who is the only father of the fatherless" in theological terms, "the source of all mental images that assume material forms" in Hinduism, or searching for the state when the absolute spirit knows itself in the form of spirit in the Hegelian definition.



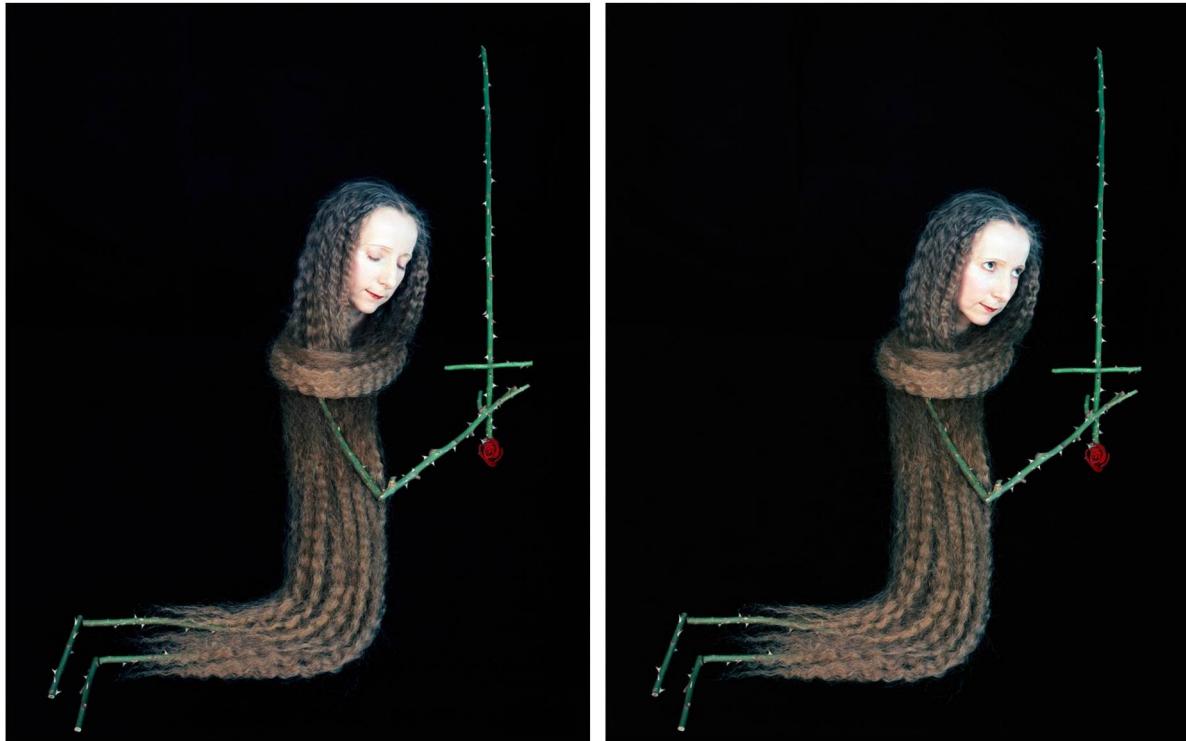
R. G., *Dilemma*, 2008

Before one can advance far on the road of such a peregrination, one goes from error to error, both for better and for worse. There are periods when, like a Pavlov dog, by reflex and without thought, a daring individual pushes himself further and further in a wrong direction and, coming upon a mirage, finds that it belongs to a magician, or in today's language, a mastermind of false promises. Each disappointed man, who lives inside himself, finds his own methods of self-destruction, and illusion is one of them. Hopefully, he does not blame others for his mistakes and misfortunes. His quest is self-deliverance from his limited under-

standing, confronted with the world and his own nature.

In the medieval period, to give it a historical backdrop, that search was associated with the knights-errant and their quest for the miraculous. They did not create that allegory – it was there, in their lives. Evoking a near-mystical resonance, we made the diptych *Knight* in which the figure is kneeling with his eyes closed in one frame and opened in the other. With its limited supply – the hair and the roses – the figure personifies a mystical hero in his twofold aspects, passive and active, feminine and masculine. He is armed not with a metal sword, but with the rapier of roses, the weapon of faith. And what is his faith? Is it innocence or blindness? To develop his little drama further, we would put it in a cinematic form of writing that can help us to picture his experience of visionary rapture. Suppose, in facing an unknown adventure, the knight comes to the sword bridge, the bridge

Knight © 2000



to the Grail castle that is only a foot wide. The secret of this magical bridge is that it broadens whenever a worthy man steps on it. When it happens, the knight is overwhelmed. The real visionary rapture is possible only in a moment when he loses his knightly pride and, "having grown to nothing," comes to the awesome silence and sees the miracle.

To continue steadfast in his resolute purpose, the knight-errant must have a horse. So we fashioned for him the *Red Horse*, which is more like a dream than a real tangible creature: the steed is laid as a mosaic vibrant with rose petals of scarlet-crimson hues. The red color (with the corresponding increase of alchemical iron) is generally associated with force, activity, will, aggression, and, of course, love and blood. Red is the last visible color in the spectrum of human vision; below it, there is an infrared region of radiation. A red filter allows only long wavelengths of light to pass through it while it absorbs the rest of the spectrum. To make a psychological parallel to this scientific fact, the "filter" of anger or any red-hot impulse, including over-devoted enthusiasm, also can absorb the rest of human feelings along with reason. Knights were not cerebral but adventurous. They were not strangers to passionate, emotional outbursts; in their psychological moments, their madness could be stronger than any other faculty. (Apropos to this, Sir Parsifal was called red knight after he killed the insolent red knight and usurped his garments.) Having a simple view of faith, the knights-errant of many medieval sagas do not call their convictions into question and are not afraid of death. But that does not make them immune to the forces of the underworld; and reading between the lines of their legends, one can feel their underlying melancholy after fighting a losing battle. Again, we can picture them cinematically standing in the wilderness and raging over the cruelty of life or, in a very different way, sorrowfully listening to their own loneliness and wounds. Once their personalities were tempered and refined, speaking alchemically, their pulsating anger was pacified by understanding, processing their martial heat into a warm light.

In the case of our *Red Horse*, the warrior is of an androgynous nature, depicted with the rose sword and hair like Lady Godiva's. The well-tended hair is a kind of seal on her fabled authority. Her red horse must move with fluid grace, for it is created from rose petals – flesh and blood in

expressing the high-pitched ideas. Drawing on various mythological sources, we can take only a handful of liberty upon interpreting a horse as a symbol of a mystical journey or a swift passage from this world to the next one. That somewhat shamanic trip might be taken in both directions, up and down, above and below. For example, the white-winged Pegasus born from Medusa's blood has a soaring power of poetry, while the centaurs – as partly humanized horses are called – are notorious for their uncontrolled sensual drives, indulgence in horseplay, and somewhat coarse immorality. Since there is a large number of centaur-like people in the human

Red Horse © 2001



race, it will always need the restrained riders and conscious control. That may sound more astringent than we intended, but mythology is full of inferior creatures; and if the half-horses are already half-men, the rest might be far less advanced in their humanization. In the words of Hermann Hesse: “Some never become human, remaining frog, lizard, ant. Some are human above the waist, fish below, each represents a gamble on the part of nature in the creation of the human... How many are ants, how many are bees! Well, each one of them contains the possibility of becoming human...”⁶⁸ We may comment in this regard that all hypersensitive individuals of creative initiatives are prone to populate the world with their own monsters, and by replaying such a habit on a larger scale, one can get an infrared picture of the whole world, in both metaphorical and literal meanings. Then even a tiny little ant may turn into a warning symbol. In the face of the great disaster that is entirely conceivable on our planet, many can feel their powerlessness and ant-insignificance to prevent anything. Viewed from such angle, *Red Horse* might also allude to the apocalyptic red horse released with the opening of the second seal, thus initiating the raging wartime of a catastrophic proportion. (Rev. 6:3-4) But before your mind begins unreeling such a picture, please, take into consideration that our horse is made from rose petals.

Returning to the idea of pilgrimage developed in our art as if in a visual sutra, we admit that many literary individuals have been exploring this theme in a dramatic, psychoanalytical, or theosophical form: some presented it as a supernatural fantasy, while others recorded it as a chronicle, requiring strict accounting for reality. The thought of pilgrimage runs all through the novels of Hermann Hesse, who apparently experienced some symptoms of that state both at an individual level and as a group “therapy.” His up-and-down epiphanies on that account are quite moving. In *The Journey to the East*, he writes, “Through the centuries this procession of believers and disciples had been on the way, towards light and wonder, and each member, each group, indeed our whole host and its great pilgrimage, was only a wave in the eternal stream of human beings, of the eternal strivings of the human spirit towards the East, towards Home.”⁶⁹ The goal, as the writer explains, is not really the East, but “the home and youth of the soul,” which is “everywhere and nowhere” but in



Thrice © 2001

“the union of all times.”

It is impossible to be perfect in this world, though one always can try to turn one’s intentions towards the highest good. To intensify them, pilgrims, philosophers’ garden seekers, and the folks with the similar inclinations tend to embrace simplicity and poverty, not so much in practice but conditionally and in a profound kind, that is with self-restraint, loneliness shared with “holy” pains, and lack of attachments. That returns us to the subject of thorny roses, garlands of which were accepted as a traditional ornamental part of the cults of the saints of different religions. And in the

lay world, the red roses served for a kind of propitiation in funerary “banquets.” People who seldom think of the eternal may be shaken by talk of death, so they prefer to use the euphemisms, and roses are one of them. In some markedly pagan sense, the ancients maintained constant secret intimacy with death. The Romans, for example, connected it with *Rosalia*, the festival of roses in commemoration of the dead, when the streets were swarmed with crowds enveloped in clouds of red roses. They complemented the solemn purpose of the event with an undeniable liveliness, suggesting subliminally that each minute of life is to be lived in that very minute. It would be fair to add here that even though the

Burning © 2000





Ropewalker © 2006

threads are fragile between young and old, living and dead, the young can take even funerary roses with festivity, believing that a lot lay ahead in their lives.

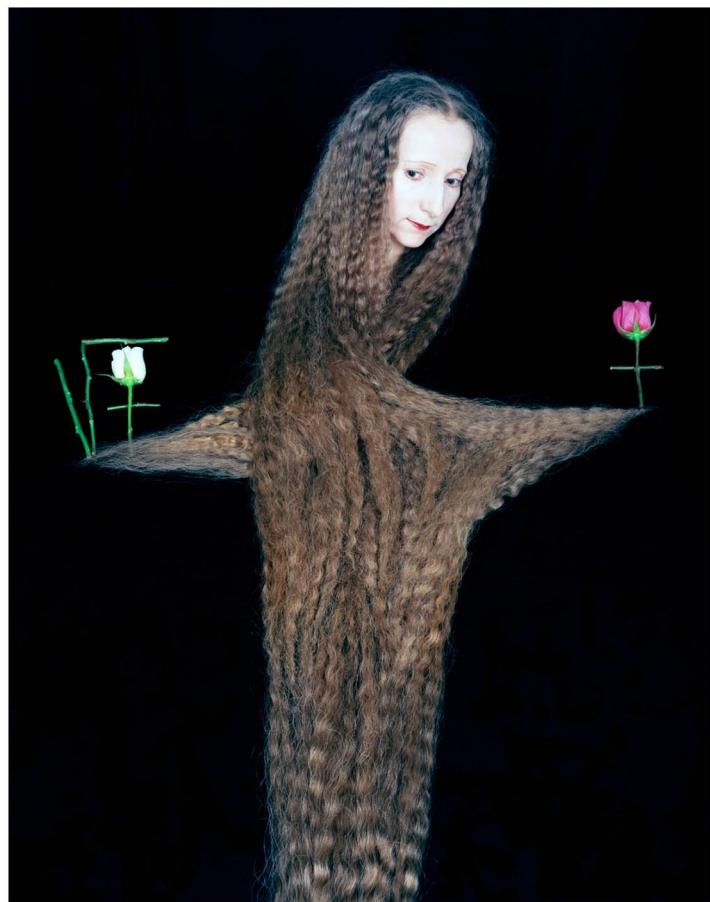
Having that in mind, we intend to talk about roses not in addition to the symbols of death, but in subtraction from them. And this is what this subtraction is really about: the body is not the true essence of the being and not exempted from death, but consciousness is. In that sense, being alive in terms of spiritual awareness is a matter of degree, like everything else. A matter of degree is also important in a pilgrimage, since some understand it literally at the physical level, while for others, it's a psychological or mental trip. More-

over, the pilgrimage map might be a mere abstraction, meaning that one is involved in the journeying from a noninvolved point of view, something similar to chemical equilibrium, when subtracting a reaction is equivalent to adding the reverse reaction. Living spontaneously without seeking life, without clinging and craving, not bothered with the lack of things, the pilgrim is led “homewards” by turning within or, rather, by the longing of his soul. Granted, he cannot reconcile an ideal with reality and often feels dislocated in time and space, but not in purpose. (Some discoveries might be just too astonishing even in that area.) The pilgrim is an ontological traveler: he travels through the realms of the four elements, which merits one shall never know unless one enters each of them – exploring, experiencing, comprehending – and consequently leaves their domains. In the home of each element, the pilgrim is homeless, for, eventually, he will step over the threshold of the next door, keeping his inner progress secret. The objective forces that could be reduced to four (or more or fewer) elements organize the order of the world, not the material world itself, which only provides the formal possibilities for their expression, but the archetypal substructure. The call of the archetype in us pushes us along the path and attracts us to our source. But the urge to seek until one’s mind can have a real rest is not without contradictions.

In *Square Root*, we paired algebraic nonsense with geometric symmetry: the two antipodal crosses are made from white and red roses that in Western esoterism came to symbolize soul and spirit. But in the arcane vocabulary of Ancient Egypt, the two buds on the crosses of the thorny stems would more likely embody *crux anasata* or ankh, a symbol of life. As live flowers, these hieroglyphs seem to be plagiarized from real life, if we may say so. With the grace of beautiful creation and the breathing presence of life, roses might well epitomize the ankh commonly held in the hands of Egyptian deities. Legends and emblems associated with this flower became rooted in our culture, yet it’s the rare man who thinks about the spiritual meaning of a single perfect rose which for most people would be just a pure idea, wreathed in clouds – if that is how to spell it. We put the white rose under the radix sign, seemingly without a clear sense of significance long-buried or “square rooted” in our

subconscious. The white rose was sacred to silence – *sub rosa*, as we say it. Sometimes, one is determined to take action directly and forcefully, sometimes *sub rosa*. In theory, that image is somewhat compatible to the emblem of the mystical marriage uniting the white lily of purity and grace with the red rose of faith and wisdom that in alchemical tradition stand for the moon and the sun, the white and red tincture of the elixir. Historically, however, the red and white roses are associated not with the union, but with the war of the Roses between the House of York and the House of Lancaster. Even if all wars are embedded within the nature of man,

Square Root © 1999



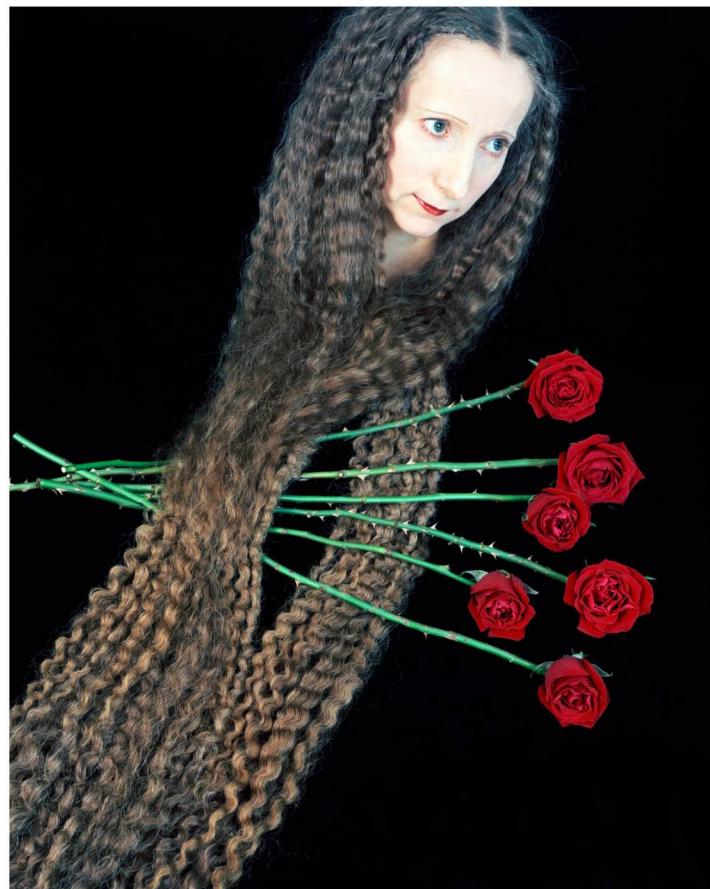
the need of peace also springs out of his character. And that blessed quality interests us the most.

There are exceptionally rare types of people who are always indeed on good terms with their neighbors, the world, and with themselves. They live on love, suffering not from conflicts and inconsistencies. In Neo-Platonic theory and, perhaps, not only there, love is a superior intermediary essence linking the human and the divine. It may sound too trivial, but the words seem to come by themselves: love animates the world, maintains peace, unites people in cultivating goodwill, and brings together a man and a woman individually in their feelings to each other. Its spiritual and

Pyramid © 2002



religious aspects are expressed in a tendency to see the whole of everything at once with compassion, or, put theologically, it is not that one has to love God, but to realize that God is love.



Bouquet © 2000

However, in the context of what is happening now in the world, the situation looks the reverse of promising and the spiritual theme centered on love might sound somewhat inappropriate when, like Cassandra, one is sure not to be believed. To talk about harmony to those who detest it would be decidedly off track. When people grow too accustomed to being

cynical and depressed, they use any situation to fuel their cynicism and depression. Then even trying to eliminate some aspects of the harmful and intolerable, they damage the gentle and the good. Examining the principle of opposites behind good intentions and bad consequences, one may find that often people pay for one with the loss of the other. Yet, the struggle of the opposites can have a healing effect as well. Understood not in a carnal sense but ontologically, the mystery of “cleansing blood” or purification develops through the interplay of the archetypal opposites taking countless forms, including war and peace, hate and love, frigid discord and cordial concord. Sometimes it looks one way, sometimes the other; the result is neither loss nor gain. After you have made your share of mistakes, you might come to think that in-between is where one can feel safer and less excited. For that, one develops a latent talent gradually.

LATENT

That brings us to the concept of the middle path, the safest way for a pilgrim in Buddhism. On the middle path, avoiding both the degradation through pleasures and self-mortification, an aspirant is involved in self-training and gradually gains mastery over one’s feelings by conquering anger and emanating love. The Buddha was also a mendicant and the “Son of Man had no where to lay his head.” (Matt. 8:20) “Isa (Jesus), son of Mary said: ‘The world is a bridge; pass over it, but build no house upon it.’” This gnostic saying was circulated around the Muslim world after the great mogul emperor Akbar inscribed it on the lofty gateway into his palace.⁷⁰

There are many intermediate stages of enlightenment between material self-actualization and spiritual self-realization. For instance, the serious instructions of Buddhist teaching are not given to “householders, but only to those who have gone forth from home to homelessness.”⁷¹ Persuaded by the need to foster greater understanding of the practices and beliefs of Buddhism postulating that our bodies are not the true essence of our beings, the seeker after the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path enters the next stage of pilgrimage: pilgrimage-in-place without the actual

journeys. Should no skeptical doubts hinder his progress at this stage, he gradually becomes conscious of his consciousness. Talking of pilgrimage, we try to envision it as a psychological adventure, leaving out certain things that could never be registered by a camera. Beginning by proceeding without,



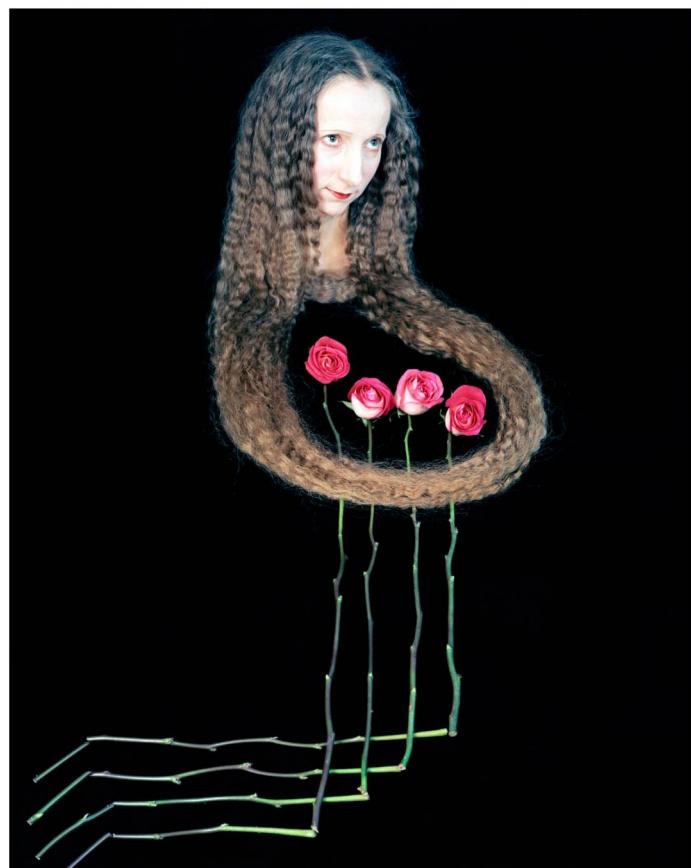
Centralizer © 2009,
photo, metal

the religious mendicant seeks his home by turning within. Sacrificing his controlling ego, he possesses only what he renounces and is not attached to anything. As much as he becomes empty, as much the highest principle operates through him. Thus leaving the path of desires, he treads the path of renunciation, and every sacrifice might look like a trap into which he has walked, but it will hold him not.

A similar motif is depicted in *Kneeling*, in which the gift of roses rests upon the thorny legs, indicating that the law of sacrifice is concealed behind all phenomena. “He who wants to enter the rose garden without a key is like unto a man who wants to walk without feet” is an alchemical saying.⁷² For acquiring anything precious in life we have to pay its price, and the more important the goal, the higher its price. Nature keeps us arrested in its organic store where exchanges are never measured with coins; currency is reserved for the lowest trades, fame, and fortune.

After mental fasting and spiritual assimilation of pain, life as we know it may completely turn around in a single

Kneeling © 2000



day. Then we intuit what we want to intuit, finding ourselves at the gates that lead into the blooming alchemical garden symbolizing life reborn. But there is an invisible barrier around the rose garden, and if an unworthy creature nears it, the fire ring flames up or a chasm opens up, keeping away the intruder. It is pointless to try to force these barriers. In modern programming language, only a certain genetically activated region in your DNA can unlock this password-protected virtual space. It has been said that in the Rose Garden of Eden, the roses were initially without thorns. Derived from ancient Iranian, the word “paradise” literally means “a garden with a wall.” When Adam and Eve were ex-

Enclosed Garden © 2000



elled from the pre-established paradisiac harmony, God placed at the east of Eden the cherub “with a flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:24) Our first parents became the source of their woe not able to find the gates of their lost Eden. Here on Earth, only the world of imagination can have the gardens of paradise, which fancied equivalent is found in many traditions. In Taoism, one needs not to search it externally; the beautiful scenery of the home garden has to be within oneself. Indian god Vishnu created his consort goddess of love Lakshmi from rose petals. The *Gulistan*, as Arabs call their rose garden, is centered on the rose of love; everything is possible in that magic place. Truly, it is an international dream of a supernatural world in which everyone is protected and free. In the symbolism of royal alchemical art, the rose garden of the philosophers is in the eternal spring and the sun is always rising. It’s interesting that what all these myths have in common is that their sacred gardens are enclosed places, not known to the profane.

We photographed roses, but in our daily life, our ambitions in horticulture went no further than watching all kinds of flora growing naturally in good weather. Any flower is pleasant, just so as it’s real. We used the laces of nature not to show its abundance and blooming, but to bring a sense of immortal substance to the mortal form. Art allows us to act out ideas that cannot be acted out in regular life. How else is it possible to visualize the unique breeze of mystical reality? The *Inner Garden* is a secret place, protected from the invasion by outsiders, a safe place to play with magic. Only on the old tapestry, one can see all the men and all the beasts united together in the peace of the Garden of Eden. And indeed, *Inner Garden* has distant similarity to the medieval tapestries depicting the virgin with the unicorn, the hard to capture mystical creature that can be tamed only by a pure soul. Instead of the unicorn, the fountain of roses with its jets of petals plays behind the fence. In French, “la rose” is a metaphor for maidenhead. Interwoven from the lattices of hair, the fence makes this place exceptionally private, perhaps giving it an air full of expectation. Poetically, the rose garden awakes the spring in the soul, but for the alchemists, this is primarily *hortus philosophicus*, that secret place where mystical transformation takes place.

This metaphorical garden was often depicted in round stained-glass windows that were common in gothic cathedrals. With a pattern of tracery resembling a rose radiating from its center, called “Mary’s wheel,” the window represents, in religious terms, the mystical center of the heart ever burning with bloom and fragrance. In the Virgin’s spiritual serenity – her title is “Mystic Rose”– the psyche is conceived anew, carried in the rose garden womb, reborn in thought, and growing up gradually perfected. The return of the original innocence of the soul is described in many allegories, and “Mystic Rose” is one of them. The process of heal-

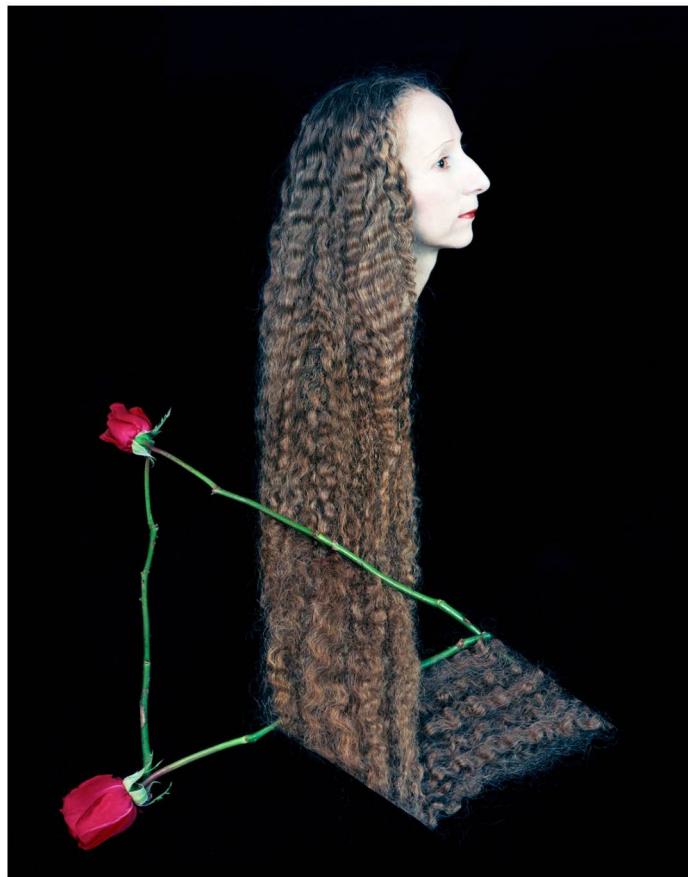
Inner Garden © 1999



ing involves several levels: spiritual, psychological, socio-logical, and even microbiological (as a self-restoration of the immune system after the war of the cells).

Since all existence seems to be based on contrast, the secret esoteric garden also has its exoteric antipode in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, depicted by Hieronymus Bosch with morbid precision. In some way, that painting has prefigured the future of the increasingly callous world, its demoralization in progress with rampant sensuality as its guiding star. C.G. Jung repeatedly complained in his writing that in the twentieth century evil became apparent, no longer concealed as it was in the past. Perhaps some things are inevitably dis-

Rose Triangle © 1998





Alchemical Bouquet © 1998

tressing (no sane person would doubt it), but this is not a fit subject for our further discussion. In mentioning the rose garden antipode, we wanted to show that the mystery of the above and the below are strangely connected as diametrical opposites, something like the word “live” and its backward spelling.

Since spiritual rejuvenation is associated with the activation of specific centers in the brain, its microcosmic *rosarium* is integrally linked to cognitive ability and visioning, hence called the philosophers’ garden. Even for those who consider themselves philosophers, it is still a closed garden, at whose gate they have to wait with timid longing.

Deep-rooted knowledge is not obtainable from scholarly research or external experience; it has to be embedded in the memory of the soul. That memory can be awakened by particular stimuli, some of which are located within the aesthetic field. In art, fundamental ideas can be transmitted visually by picture-writing, as if in alchemical manuscripts. What's important is that pictography is able to represent an entire thought process at once, as opposed to breaking down an idea into components of discursive thoughts, as in writing. That's how Dante described his vision of *bel giardino*: "Here is the rose, in which the divine word was made flesh."⁷³

In the eyes of the alchemists, the image of the prophetic rose represents the glory of the resurrected life. Their philosophers' garden cannot be closed by being filled to capacity. After the processing in the alchemical furnace, where the trying and tempering can reach a high degree of the sacred experience, the soul is supposed to spiritualize itself by absorbing its ego-impulse to obliterate its lower persona. Then and only then, is the alchemist admitted to the rose garden. The adventures of the golden ass Lucius exemplify the stages of that process by beastly allegory, while the sober speculative interpretation of a psychoanalyst would be presented as follows: after Lucius discovered (or created) a space in which fantasy can't be distinguished from what it isn't, he projected the mystery of purification and, seemingly observing its secret rites, was liberated from his instinctual drives. And the blessed fool ate his roses. Then as an evolved, conscious man, initiated into the mysteries of Isis, he was admitted to the higher mysteries of Osiris. Usually, people see "reality" as what the world around them is, but through experiencing imaginatively what they hope to realize one day in their life, their inner harmony might manifest itself outwardly in their surroundings.

Running the risk of losing our foothold on the metaphorical heights of the meaning of the alchemical rose, we tried to express it in what might be called "rose codes" liberated from the naturalism and lavishness of that flower. Thus, in *Rosarium*, the bouquet is "arranged" as a square, the geometrical unity of the four elements. The drops of water compose the flask, airlifting it from reality – the flask seems to be almost absent. The alchemist or rather his *soror mystica*, whose inclined figure looks nearly as bodiless as her

flask, imbibes the dewdrops through the stems of the roses. Far from documental evidence, the work discards the conventional means for imitating nature, it does not rely on scientific naturalism or emulate the examples of great masters' art, but depicts an introspective state. The surreal visual language of alchemical speechlessness might be the most fitting for that situation. It's not easy to express in art and human speech the living ideas and abstractions. Therefore, considering them closely, or at least something of them, one has to rely on a certain elasticity of mind or see them in a sort of mysterious cinema at the back of one's brain. For example, in hermetic terms, the red rose is also an alchemical furnace,

Rosarium © 1998



however odd it may sound, but if we transcribe that metaphor into the alphabet of creative arts, it might be more easily understood. The alchemists say that their fire is water, maintaining that the secret fire burns without flames and their water does not wet the hands. That ambivalent saying is resolved in a paradox associated with the initiation rites, namely of washing by fire and burning in water. The principles of transformation are veiled to a degree that might seem bizarre and exaggerated; besides, to know about the rites of passage is by no means necessary to understand them. Life has countless layers of forms veiling much deeper layers

Letter © 1998



of ideas that art tries to approach through a grand interplay of intuition and visual symbolism.

Taking the alchemical rose as a metaphor for the introspective union and love, we have to consider that the principle of love is expressed in a union of whatever level it occurs: from below, where you can see roses in any hands, to above, as figments of imagination in the infinity receding frame. In the burning bush disguise, "love is God's fire," in Jacob Böhme's expression. Following the old axiom "know yourself," we employed the symbolic language of fire-colored roses to envisage the rising conscious effort able to absorb or burn out the gross impulse of ego, thus bringing inner spiritual fire to a blooming phase. The self grows upon the ashes of the ego when everything of "mine" melts in flame, and something of "our" comes instead. Then the flammable face of the world is seen in a new light, in its transpersonal panorama ranging from light coming from spirit to heat coming from matter. Roses bloomed in our photographs for several years, usually in parallel to some other gifts of nature, of which the seeds of pomegranates were the most expressive.

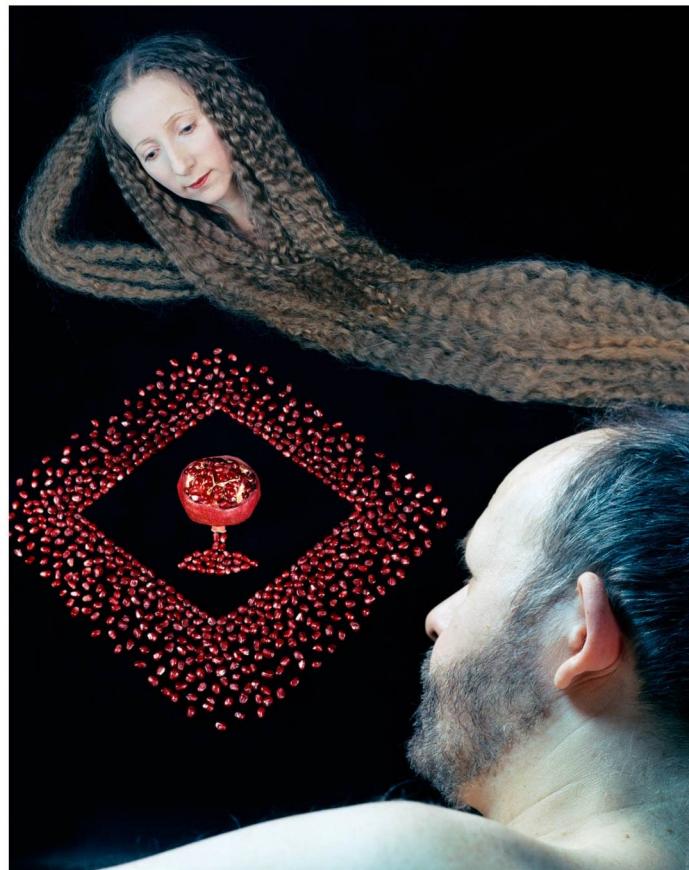
8: GARDEN OF POMEGRANATES

We can write verses about roses, but pomegranates we have to eat. After flowers, fruits must come, turning the course of development from blooming to harvesting. The same “red” themes of love and blood, fire and water, and life and death continued in the series of mosaics made from the seeds of pomegranates – a fruit said to have emerged from the blood of the slain Dionysus. The pomegranate mosaics reverberated on light like rubies, inlaying weird and wonderful subjects such as the grail, the sacrificial lamb, or the midnight sun displaying its red beams *à la* pyrotechnic tricks. These fruits are delicious and beautiful as though they came from the Promised Land.

A pomegranate seed played a similar role in the destiny

Goblet © 1998





Grailing © 1998

of Persephone, like the apple in the fall of Eve. Coming from a different branch of mythology, the fatal apple seems to pick up the thread of bad luck from where the pomegranate had dropped it. Even regarding language, these fruits are etymologic siblings: "*pomum granatum*" (Lat.), literally meaning "apple of many seeds." The deep color of a pomegranate almost tastes red in the mouth. However, one must not break the taboos of the sacred spaces: nothing can be taken from Eden, the mystical rose garden, the world of fairies, the underworld, or the hell. But deception comes easily; it is almost a routine: for eventually, all men have detrimental experiences and become failures reduced to the role of

sinners in the hands of angry gods. Naturally, after eating their fruits of knowledge, both grand ladies of the classical and biblical worlds became, as psychoanalysts would put it, misplaced personalities. Misplaced, misled, and misbranded.

As to *pomum granatum*, which meaning is ambivalent as both heavenly perfection and earthly passion, respectively it opens up two passages: one is to liberation, the other to captivity. That may give one the sour pleasure of a hypothesis unconfirmed, but this fruit is often used as a botanical metaphor for the benefits of the prophetic garden in the messianic future. With the wording, all too appropriate to that outcome, the Kabbalistic tractate *A Garden of Pomegranates*

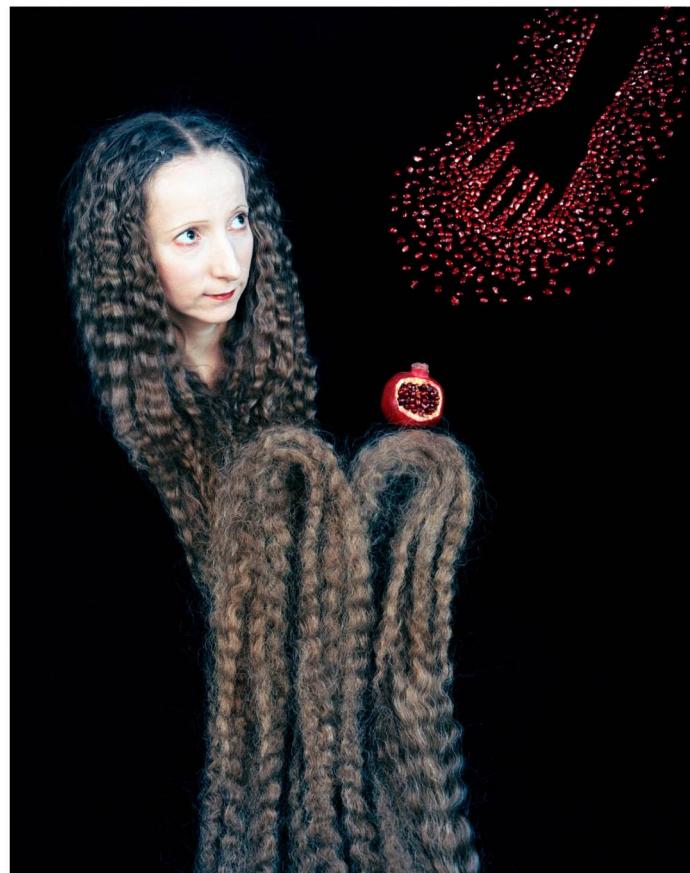
Cloud © 1999



associates its title with Garden of Eden, which is a symbol of the spiritual center.⁷⁴ Paradise lost is equal to the loss of that mystical center, within and without, brought about by the amnesia of spiritual principles, the loss of innocence in the ideal sense, and, consequently, the fall into gross matter. On the mundane level, that lamentable state can be illustrated by a life of mere mechanical existence, when not an individual, but his habits “live” his life.

Let us have a quick look at the netherworld “garden of Eden” in the Greek mythology where Persephone was pre-destined to become the queen. Stolen by the underworld god Hades but released by order of Zeus, Persephone was about

Pomegranate Hand © 1998



to leave the kingdom of the dead when she was tempted by Hades, who suggested at her parting that she taste the juicy pomegranate. Curious, she ate a single pomegranate seed and had to remain in the underworld. Since this fruit was also a symbol of marriage, her union with Hades became indissoluble. Replicating the alternation of day and night, Persephone spent part time above on the Olympus and part time below in the depths of the earth, primarily in wintertime when life is seemingly dead.

It would be worth mentioning that Persephone's myth underlies the principles of the Eleusinian mysteries implying the parable of the fall of the human soul in matter (due to its attachment to the body), its miserable wandering in the physical world, and eventual liberation through reestablishing its connection with the divine source. The virgin Persephone descends into the underworld like the soul into the night of the body. However, she is not one of the walking dead submerged in complete ignorance and non-being. In her case, the concept of absence from physical life belongs to the ontological level. Her mysteries portray the legend of the immaculate soul that with each rebirth receives a new body with the beclouded mind remembering nothing. The self is like a plant cut down to its roots, only to grow again next year. In the realm of theology, the principles of descending and ascending have not changed much since the pagan Greeks. The phase of the fall and coming close to the edge of hell, entailing grief and suffering, exhibits an obvious parallel to the fate of biblical Eve, while the spiritual potential of the ascending soul, its restitution, and glorification can be traced in the image of the Virgin Mary.

To visualize Persephone's fate, we made her bloody bridal veil from the red fleshy seeds of a pomegranate. Her hair represents her natural appendages, like arms and legs, made of "insubstantial substance." Who needs anatomy in souls? The face image is only a cipher for the hermetic meaning of the classical myth alluding among others to the idea that the human body is ethereal in its pre-existence before it becomes terrestrial in the perceptible world. In sorrows and *perhappiness*, man lives in it with a feeling of longing inside for something he cannot precisely define. Therefore, all Ancient Greek mysteries maintained that the knower of the self raises above all sorrows; later that idea

echoed in the eminent Latinism *nosce te ipsum* (know yourself). Do not imagine that after realization one becomes a phantom: the Greeks did not like to cast an Eastern enchant-



Veil of Persephone © 1998

ment over their minds (and you will not find Socrates in the Bible for that matter). The state of self-realization in the classical mind could be described as an uprising consciousness of an immortal substance living in the mortal flesh. Admittedly, this idea is transnational and intercontinental. There are significant similarities between the conduct of self-realized

people, no matter what religious ideas their life was founded upon and what kind of a personality they have initially exhibited.

Everything external is void in the image *Hermit*, whose solitary figure holds the infernal light of a pomegranate, seeding its rays into the darkness. The sparks of its infrared light outline the figure of the hermit as if covering him/her with a cloak of separation and invisibility (“him” would be more appropriate here considering the prevalence of the male gender in the ascetic practices). The image is framed in the pomegranate twilight zone, not much different from that of the goddess Persephone. Could anybody give us true information about that zone: is it solid, plasmatic, gaseous, or atmospheric like a haze? The thought of it can give one a science fiction feeling of being the only survivor with not a living soul in sight. But if we look at that condition from the philosophic point of view of Arthur Schopenhauer, who said, “Great minds are like eagles, and build their nest in some lofty solitude,”⁷⁵ we might understand why solitary people find themselves in their proper element in seclusion. Silence is all they want to hear. One can be damn good in not speaking, but to reach the state of consciousness free of thoughts is close to impossible. In such a condition, one does not invent but receives living ideas.

Giving our *Hermit* an appearance of an anchorite, for one must be determined not to lose sight of the higher aims of life in the alarming void, we had in mind his intensely prayer-oriented ascetic life. That explains the tension and striving within his nature: the whole posture of the half-real figure speaks about its quest. Every energetic impulse is to be turned to hastening within since in his loneliness the hermit cannot rely on the external support, only on his inner resources. The infrared light of the pomegranate *laterna magica* outlines the hermit’s aura protecting him in the illusory emptiness. People fear isolation as children fear darkness. Alone in the darkness, the hermit is in no way bound by geographical considerations: if there are houses, streets, and forests, they are invisible. By trying to silence his own thoughts, he searches for a guide in the self. The Buddha said that a *samana* (ascetic, literally a “toiler”) illuminates the forest in which he lives alone. When he is accustomed to the benefit of being alone, the calm solitude will surround

him like a fortress.

There is no need to deny that loneliness has its evils. Dissolving the world into frightful emptiness, it provokes one unto an asocial attitude, a condition that sociologists term “alienation.” Here we must clarify the difference between seclusion and alienation, for what might be beneficial to the spiritually alert individual can be harmful to a man with the lesser interests, particularly with an ingrained sense of community. Doctor Schweitzer wrote that to cure a patient of the African tribe he had to keep all his family in the hospital. For not everyone can endure solitude even in small doses.

Hermit © 1998





Hair-Raising Sun © 1999

Our representation of the Gnostic idea of the self-luminous soul, regarded nowadays primarily as an outdated delicacy for the dreamy mind, is somewhat functional because it helps us to avoid both extremes: bumping into things and flying through the clouds. In the light of the pomegranate *Hair-Raising Sun*, the empty space of the sky is black. The transmundane sun shines with somewhat infernal infrared light over the top of the rising mountains of the hair. Since the process of spiritual illumination was often called “*opus contra naturam*,” it has a kind of “hair-raising” side effect, which terrifying sensual experience is nevertheless stimulating to the nervous system. It is said that as soon as the

serpent of kundalini gets on fire and rises, a man's whole nature begins to change. Each level of consciousness has a sun at its center.

Thinking about the symbolic light that has passed through the filter of intellect, we tend to believe that its solar radiance can irradiate the dark recesses of the psyche. That type of a luminary does not flood the earth with warmth and radiate like an astronomical sun, but illuminates inwardly. The midnight place of this so-called transmundane sun is in the deepest darkness ascribed to the Egyptian Duat, Tibetan Bardo, or Christian Limbo. That brings us back to *The Golden Ass* Lucius, who poetically describes the mystery of

Carry Berries © 2001



his initiation as a vision of the midnight sun below all layers of the elements. "I approached the confines of death: and having trodden on the threshold of Proserpine [Latin for Persephone] returned, having been carried through all the elements. In the depth of midnight, I saw the Sun glittering with a splendid light, together with the infernal and supernal gods." The last sentence is of a strange captivating beauty, so for those who can enjoy its flavor, we give it in the original Latin: "*Nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine, deos infernos, et deos superos.*"⁷⁶

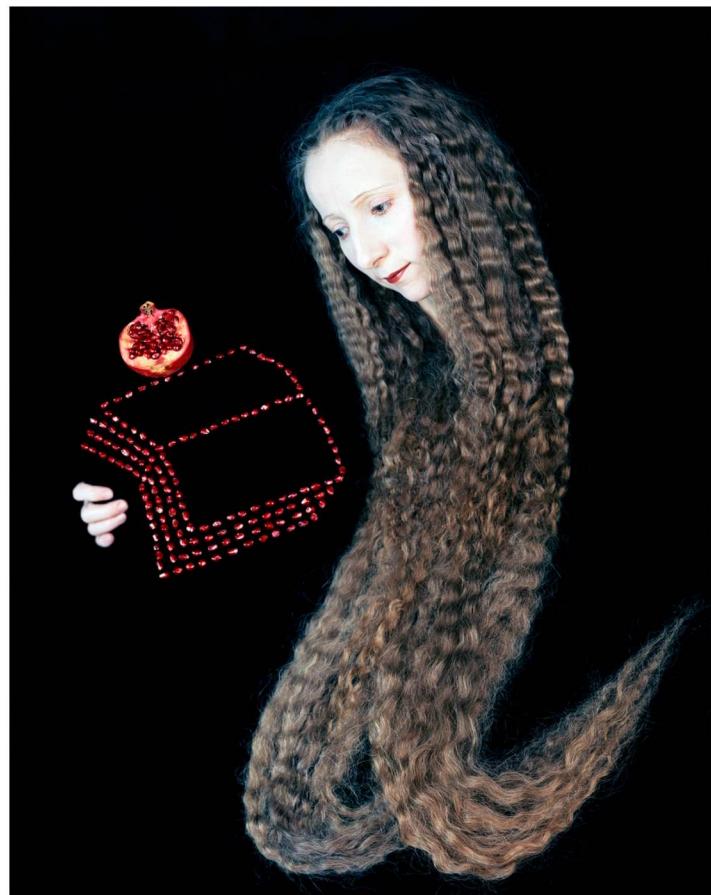
Pomegranate Book also features some anchorite, whose figure, graceful in its austere lines, bends down over the book or, rather, bows down to its secret emptiness. That is the search for the knowledge that no longer needs knowledge, for to know a phenomenon fully one must experience it thousand times, leaving behind all "learned ignorance" empowered through social education. Caught in the middle of the process, one cannot run away from the accumulated loneliness. All seems to dwell in the lonesomeness that dissipates itself in pieces: lone... men...some... ess...

L S O M E
O E S
N N S
E

The forbearance is more than necessary for getting hermetic knowledge and reading the "infrared" book of life requiring the proper training of a hermit. The single-minded concentration has to withstand all attacks of inner ambitions and outer curiosity. That type of a "schooler" teaches himself how to cast away any form of irritation, bitterness, and enmity towards an alien environment, malevolent people, and doubting himself. There is no justification for your own weaknesses, for it will be impossible to get rid of them, or so we thought despite realizing that the resolving of one old weakness entails the appearance of another in its place. Patience and self-control that does not respond to provocations can lead one out of old thought-habits, however, inner stabilization comes not as a result of striving, but through its gradual transcendence.

Eventually, the glimpses of insight begin to fall from

above, most often unexpectedly as if a seedy pomegranate or apple falling on your head, as in the legend of Newton's apple. Then the unconscious, instinctive habits begin to give



Pomegranate Book © 1998

way to the conscious intuitive principles turning gradually into one's navigating force. In Chinese alchemy, a person in such an intermediate state is called an "embryonic immortal" who is already capable of emitting light within.

The pomegranate *Oil Lamp* might be counted as one of the symbolic attributes for the effort of non-sleeping in a

dreamlike flow of events. The curls of hair serve as rising flames and smoke as if they are playing around a shape-shifting genie let out of the hermetic vessel. If in the preceding



Oil Lamp © 1999

images there are subjects and objects – the hermit holds his lantern, and Persephone wears her infrared bridal veil – in this *Oil Lamp*, the subject and object coincide. Moreover, this “centaur,” part human, part lamp, shapeshifting and nimbly “light-footed,” represents lighting per se. One needs the inner light to get around at *The Dark Night of the Soul*, to use Saint

John of the Cross' eminent epithet. In the works with fire and roses, that light is red; here, with getting the status of a living organism, it becomes redemptive. Not for a beautiful phrase, the spirit of a man is called a candle of the Lord in the Book of Proverbs. (20:27) All descriptions of such a candle, be they of a mythological, theological, or alchemical nature, eventually come down to one word: light. Even if the rays (of light and hope) are weakening while passing through the material lens of our world, by piercing its darkness, they unroll the mystery of the human potential. The source of the inner light does not need lighting devices. There is a big difference in the understanding of life, whether seen through the reflecting light of social norms or of those who are not merely reflecting the light but who are also able to transmit it themselves.



R.G., Sketches for *Photoglyphs* © 1988

With a few calculations in realism, the body missing in *Oil Lamp* is restituted in the image *Hookah* (p. 438) with its smoking spiral “pomegranating” upward. We do not want to make this chapter a repository of symbols and, accepting things as they are or might be, would like to add a little informative episode that touches nothing in us that might be termed spiritual. Many people smoke, and some of them “tunnel” into it in an introverted way, in a somewhat organic continuation of their mind and pensiveness. In the Levant, smoking hookah (or *galian*, *narghile*, *shisha*, *lula*) was popular with men and women regardless of their class level

in society. In our version of that ritual, somewhat catering to exotic taste, the vaporizing “tobacco” is passing through the juicy basin of a pomegranate (the aficionados of that activity may substitute tobacco with cannabis or opium in their imaginations). Our smoker is sitting in the relaxed zigzag posture barely touching the non-existent ground – an almost real woman in unison with her almost real intention.

Sometimes we felt that our own eyes were cameras: when we blinked, the shutters came down recording what we saw in conceptual forms. Many ideas appeared as flashes; for instance, the pomegranate came like a comet in our photographs. And indeed, the image *Comet* was the first in the se-

Hookah © 1999





Comet © 1998

ries exploring mythological health benefits of this fruit, recognized in many cultures both as delicious food and a polysemic symbol. *Rimmon*, the Hebrew word for “pomegranate,” was supposedly carved on the columns of Solomon’s temple. This “apple of many seeds” was frequently depicted in the hands of Madonna holding Jesus in one hand and the pomegranate in the other, and before her, in the hands of Aphrodite and Hera. In Chinese tradition, pomegranate is a homonym of the word “fecundity,” hence symbolizing abundance, fertility, and a happy future with many children. Along with the fecundity of nature, this fruit is an image of the oneness of the universe: the seeds of the multiple and diverse are reconciled

in the single red “globe” of the pomegranate which is full of arils, and each one is the very essence of the pomegranate tree.

So we toasted with red pomegranate juice. For the time being, the vibrant red fleshy arils, scattered or laid out in strange shapes, became the stock-in-trade of our photographic conjuring. Mixing poetic and prosaic language (mythological symbolism and anti-inflammatory properties of the healthful antioxidant), this fruit seems to unite fire and water elements as well: the flame red geysers of *Milky Pomegranate* would be a good enough example of it. In the sacred precinct of pomegranate, the life cycle is continually perpetu-

Milky Pomegranate © 1998



ated: the red milk of sparkling arils flows in two springs of fertility as if from two cornucopias. Life is forever in flux, renewed continuously, destroying nothing without replacing it with something else. Alternation in the realm of form is endless, from simple stones to people, all in this world of appearances is born again and again. This flux is ceaselessly changing without changing essentially, always remaining just as is. Likewise, nature always tends to improve its creations but never attains it, being always in passing. Ancient Hindus, the custodians of the most bizarre bits of wisdom, left us their adage on this sea of changes: "Cross the ocean of temporal becoming before your body breaks!"

Eastern Games © 1998



Even though the pomegranate is juicy with life and paradisiac fragrance, the intensity of its blood red color evokes the sense of mystery, a mystery of blood. Our photographic extracts of it meant to emphasize this very point while treating the pomegranate as an ambivalent symbol of love and blood, life and death. After all, an alchemical dissolution takes place nowhere else but in the blood of the alchemist. Hence, in *Bleeding Heart*, the red seeds, or rather pomegranate blood cells, erythrocytes, or hemoglobin corpuscles, whichever suits the better picturing, stream out with infinite velocity. The *hema* (“blood” in Greek) seems to be “vomited” from the heart, shaped like a pomegranate grail. Within the circle of protection drawn by the hair, this grail represents an invulnerable still point, a place of safety where love leaves no room for doubt, and herein lies the cure of man’s being. However, when the flow of senses pours out from this center for interacting with the world around that entangles us into its havoc and often unsurpassable obstacles, we are in danger of losing self-control – our hearts are on our lips, and our tongues betray us. Literature is replete with examples of good-natured emotionally intelligent people that suddenly inflame when faced with the hideous triumphs of meanness and deceit. Putting oneself in their position, can one blame them for it? With all those good intentions that may cause great misery, the outpouring of feeling could be both gratifying and make one’s life more difficult.

Opened to fate, “the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of,” wrote Blaise Pascal in *Pensées*. (IV, 277) When logic is not at odds with feelings, “We know the truth, not only by reason but also by the heart.” By reason and observation, we can know all cyclopedic facts about our hearts (that they are mere pumps, hollow muscular bags the size of the fist that weigh less than ten ounces, and perpetually beat their rhythms while passing six quarters of blood through our organisms each minute). While by the heart, we know something else than we know by reason. In the inwardness of feeling and intuition, one can experience a sense of divine presence, at least that was promised to those blessed who are pure in the heart (Matt. 5:8). Then an immediate sensation of every finite thing could become a representation of the infinite. With this unproven, unscientific fact, the heart can win out over the head. Well before Christian pietism,

a.k.a. the religion of the heart, *Kata Upanishad* (VI, 15) reached an all-embracing conclusion: “When all the ties [ignorance, passions, and other weaknesses] of the heart are



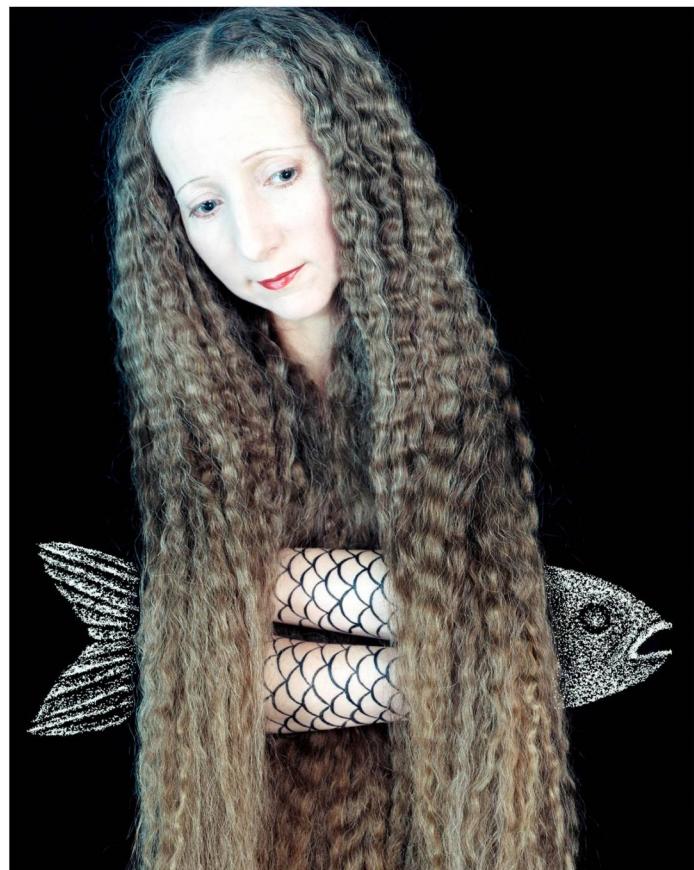
Bleeding Heart © 1998

severed here on earth, then the mortal becomes immortal – here ends the teaching.” But before the teaching ends, the heart will be pierced hundred times in bleeding of compassion.

Piercing the chest, *Salmon* (p. 443) seems to loom right out of the red stream of *Bleeding Heart*. The scene is barely

possible: the vertical figure and the horizontal fish form together a cross standing in the red water gap. The *Salmon*'s scales play like rubies on black velvet; the fish's pomegranate eye is wide open, while the solitary figure, gazing above as if pleading for grace, stands still in the seemingly rolling red waves. In our minds, this strange scene alludes to the mysteriously wounded fisher king, the keeper of the Holy Grail. His heart is pierced by the mystic fish. Stuck in red waters and frozen in passivity, the fisher king of the wasted land is waiting for redemption. And the great thing is that the wounded king is sustained by the Grail alone. This is just a part of the saga, perhaps somewhat questionable in its au-

Double Fish © 2002





Salmon © 1999

thenticity, but its psychoanalytical undercurrent might be no less odd than the fishing stunt shown in this photograph.

We hope we will not reduce the story of that *Roy Peschour* to absurdity by suggesting that the **fisher** king is **fishing** for himself or, in other newly coined wordplay,

selffishing in the transitional process of unselffishing,

as one might put it. The elements of a similar interpretation can be found in a Coptic magic papyrus depicting

*Christ as a fisherman **fishing** for himself in the form of a **fish**.*

The idea of the soul's suffering projected into the human world through the fish symbolism became particularly evident with the beginning of the astrological age of the Pisces ("Ichthus," fish in Greek, is a symbol of Christianity). The miraculous food of the "loaves and fishes" that Christ served his disciples symbolized His suffering for them, for He was the fish that was broiled. Going further into the past we can find that the pre-Christian Celtic legends describe a big fish known as Salmon of Wisdom, and anybody who eats it would, in turn, gain its wisdom. The Celtic salmon ate nine miraculous hazelnuts and became miraculous itself; we "fed" our salmon with pomegranate seeds, which is seemingly not much of a difference if we are to believe the legends about wise fish.

The images *Lamb* and *Hermit* share the same birthday: we photographed them on the same cold day of December 4, 1998. The golden fleece of *Lamb* was created from the fleece of hair – a naturally occurring idea – while the flying crimson banner "grew" from the pomegranate seeds. Under the photographic flash, their arrangement shines as a mosaic made from red gemstones. By joining human, animal, and plant in our version of Agnus Dei, we thought about the soul on the basis of its spiritual, sensory, and physical expressions in their alloy. In an exhilarating leap into an infinite mystery, the soul transcends the world of differences.

It is well known that the symbol of the sacrificial lamb associated with Christ, comes from the Apocalyptic traditions. When St. John beheld the vision of it in the light of compassion, he wanted to follow the Lamb of God to the last moment, to go on toward the same fate. In the past, that subject was given extensive coverage in all fields of creative mind and expression of Christendom. In Medieval and Renaissance art, Agnus Dei usually appeared as triumphant and bleeding at the same time, for example, in the altar piece of Jan van Eyck, the lamb's head shines in glory, while its blood is pouring to the grail. Francisco de Zurbaran painted several versions of the lamb in a slightly sinister manner, always with its legs tied, with or without a nimbus above its head, while Albrecht Dürer portrayed Agnus Dei with the triumphant banner in a sun-like disc high in the sky. In his series of woodcuts *Apocalypse*, the image titled *The Adoration of the Lamb and the Hymn of the Chosen* precedes the

leaf picturing the opening of the seventh seal, thereby implying that the vision of the lamb is the last before the final catastrophe. John the Baptist was often painted with the lamb



Lamb (after Dürer) © 1998

in his hands, owing to his exclamation at the sight of Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) Perhaps the altar triptych by Hans Memling showing the Baptist’s full figure holding the tiny lamb would be the most memorable.

According to biblical lore, Almighty Lord comes not as

a lion but as a lamb, whose plan is written with “the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” (1 Peter 1:19) If we accept the Romans’ maxim “The abuse of the best is the worst of abuses” (*Abusus optimi pessimus*), which however did not deter them from the infamous indictment, the notion of the ideal victim would not be separate from the worst of abuses that, according to St. Peter, was planned from the above. Putting the meaning of sacrifice into a different perspective, we cannot help but remind all concerned of the fact that the ancients thought that we are served as a feast for the gods. Arthur Schopenhauer envisaged that idea almost cinematically: “We are like lambs in a field, disporting themselves under the eye of the butcher, who chooses out first one and then another for his prey.”⁷⁷

How are we to reconcile these two distinct notions of sacrifice, its beneficial and devastating aspects, each of which requires a separate approach? Perhaps the best way would be to stay at the neutral zone of philosophy, without deepening into the complexity of theology or getting ironic about the high-quality organic “lamb” meat served as a feast for the gods. Let us see how Schopenhauer himself reconciles these points, fending off his own irony by advocating asceticism and mortification of the will or the force at the core of man’s being. “As he [a self-sacrificing man] himself denies the will that appears in his own person, we will not resist when another does the same thing, in other words, inflicts wrong on him. Therefore, every suffering that comes to him from outside through chance or the wickedness of others is welcome to him: every injury, every ignominy, every outrage. He gladly accepts them as the opportunity for giving himself the certainty that he no longer affirms the will... Just as he mortifies the will itself, so does he mortify its visibility, its objectivity, the body.”⁷⁸ As fatal as it seems, Schopenhauer does not mean that Thanatos wins again, but tries to show how to free oneself from the will that, in his meaning, is of the same nature as the will in any ant obeying the order it follows without understanding until death makes all irrelevant.

If we ignore a certain residue of sadness, it will be easier to understand that the process of perfection is carried out through the sacrifice – the underlying imperative for many spiritual doctrines. The experiences of both the agony and

ecstasy in the moment of transfiguration make one feel like a mystic sacrificial lamb with the flying banner of victory over the lower self. With that, the capacity for self-expression may be granted, and in its ultimate form, it can turn one into a living oracle or an actual perpetrator of the drama of Christ. The mythology of dying and rising gods, sacrificed and resurrected, is found in many beliefs. Surrendering of the self-will opens another vista, allowing one always to act in harmony with the creation, not on blind nature impulses or personal consideration.

Gradually our bleeding pomegranate saga that brought the fire theme to fruition transitioned into a quieter visual narrative: the deep red color obtained the gentleness of a yellow glow that became prominent in our growing photographic flora. Originated by the new period in our life, this flora was of the warm-temperate climate – that is how we felt while shooting the mosaics made of yellow petals of asters. However, another series of images with translucent veils reflected much more serious changes in our vision of life. We are reluctant to dwell on the reasons. The veil to the “other” side seemed to be lifting while we were entering another dimension of our consciousness, thus giving the mystical theme in our art another spin.



Footnotes

Chapter 1: Perhappiness

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